

Other "Sudden" Stories by
OLIVER STRANGE

SUDDEN—OUTLAWED
SUDDEN

THE MARSHAL OF LAWLESS

SUDDEN—GOLD SEEKER

SUDDEN RIDES AGAIN

SUDDEN TAKES THE TRAIL

THE RANGE ROBBERS

SUDDEN MAKES WAR

SUDDEN PLAYS A HAND

THE LAW O' THE LARIAT

A "Sudden" Story

BY

OLIVER STRANGE

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TO
SIR EMSLEY CARR
WHOSE KIND ENCOURAGEMENT
BROUGHT THIS BOOK INTO
BEING

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THE LAW O' THE LARIAT

PROLOGUE

"WELL, Forby, yu got anythin' to say afore we string yu up?"

The harsh question conveyed the inevitability of death, and the speaker evidently regarded it as a mere formality. A powerfully-built man of little more than thirty, attired in the garb of the cattle ranges, he stood rocking on his heels, both thumbs caught in his gun-belt. His deep-set eyes, hooked nose and out-thrust jaw gave him a predatory appearance, and had the thin, cruel lips not been concealed by a drooping black moustache he would have suggested a vulture even more patently. That he possessed both force and passion was evident.

The man to whom he spoke was of a different type. Older by twenty years, with greying hair and beard, he had the strong patient face of one who plods on, knowing his task in life is well-nigh hopeless, but doing it nevertheless to the best of his ability. He was of those who peopled the great waste spaces of the American continent, fighting against almost impossible odds, and wresting a bare subsistence from the untamed soil. He sat now on a log, hands tied behind his back, chin sunk in his chest, his whole attitude one of despair. At the words, however, he straightened up, and his gaze went instinctively to the rough little log cabin he had built with his own hands, the rude corral, the patch of fenced ground, which was only now beginning to be productive, and

the stream with its shady willows and cottonwoods. He had made the place, he loved it, and now he must leave it, perhaps in a shameful way. Somehow it seemed unreal. The sun shone, the birds chirped, the murmur of the stream came like a whisper, and yet the air was pregnant with tragedy.

His gaze swept the six men who stood round in a half-circle regarding him curiously but implacably. They were cowboys—hired creatures of the man who had spoken, and he knew he had nothing to hope for from them; they would do as they were bid. And then he looked their leader squarely in the face and spoke, his voice low, steady, and without rancour.

"I can on'y repeat what I said afore—I never touched any o' yore stock, Bartholomew," he said heavily.

"Yet we find 'em in yore pasture, with the brand changed from Bar B to Four B," retorted the other; adding with a sneer, "Yu chose a mighty convenient brand, didn't yu?"

"The Four B was my brand years afore I come to these parts, an' I'm usin' my own name, too," the older man pointed out. "If I'd done what yu say, d'yu think I'd be such a fool as to leave 'em run along with my cattle with the brands unhealed?"

"Oh, yu dam nesters think yu can get away with anythin', an' yu didn't know we suspected yu," said Bartholomew. "How d'yu account for 'em bein' there anyways? Yore pasture's fenced an' cows ain't got wings."

"I dunno how they come there," said the other dully. "I was in Hope last night, gettin' supplies. Someone musta driven 'em in while I was away."

"Likely tale that," sneered the big man. "Yu done it yoreself an' went to town to put up an alibi. Mighty smart, but it don't go."

The accused man shook his head dubiously. This was the end. Ever since he had taken up his quarter section he had had to fight. He had been threatened, his cattle stolen, his horses maimed, and once his little crop of hay for winter feed burned, but he had hung on doggedly, hoping that strict

attention to his own affairs would overcome the local prejudice against "nesters." And this might have come about but for the hostility of the man before him.

"I've a right here," he said, answering his own thought. "It's State land."

"It's 'free range'," Bartholomew said tersely.

"Yes, free to yu an' not to me," flashed the prisoner.

"I was here first," the other pointed out, and then: "but we've had all this out a'ready; nothin's free to a rustler except a rope."

The seated man shrugged his shoulders with an air of resignation. "I ain't a thief, but seein' yu got me thrown an' tied, I reckon I gotta pull my freight," he said. "If it warn't for my boy I dunno as I'd care; I'm tired o' buckin' the odds, but he ain't go no one else."

"Pull yore freight?" gibed the big man, a cruel scorn in his tone. "It's too late, my fine fella, yu should 'a' done that when yu were told to, months back."

The bound man looked at him in slow surprise. Hitherto he had believed that he had only to quit the country, but now he saw that Bartholomew was ruthless and meant to have his life. The charge against him was a "frame-up," probably contrived by the man who had condemned him, but he could not prove his innocence. He studied the faces of the other men, but while one of them, whom he knew as Darby, turned his eyes away, the rest showed nothing but sardonic contempt; to them he was a cattle thief and deserved no mercy.

"Yu boys stand for this?" he asked hopelessly.

Darby was the only one who spoke. "Aw, boss, if he clears out o' the country——" he suggested.

Bartholomew swore an oath. "No, by God!" he gritted. "Nesters is like Injuns—the on'y good 'uns are dead 'uns. He had notice, an' now we've got him with the goods he's had a fair hearin'. He's outstayed his welcome, an' p'raps it'll be a warnin' to others that nesters ain't wanted around here. Get yore rope, Penton."

The man addressed walked to where the horses were grouped, took his lariat from the saddle-horn, and returned with it swinging in his hand.

"Yu tuhn my dad loose or I'll blow yu to hellamile, Bartholomew."

The command came in a shrill, childish treble, that trembled with rage or fear, and every eye turned to the speaker. He had stolen up unperceived and now stood only a few yards from the group round the condemned man. A mere lad of about twelve, shabbily dressed in a blue flannel shirt and faded overalls, his ultimatum would have been something for men to laugh at but for the fact that his youthful fingers gripped a heavy rifle, the barrel of which was directed full at Bartholomew's breast. The boy's features were distraught with passion.

"I'm meanin' it!" he cried. "Turn dad loose, or yu'll get yores, Bartholomew."

The threatened man laughed. "All right, kid," he said, and stepped towards the prisoner, at the same time winking significantly to the man with the rope. The boy, watching the leader, did not see Penton's sudden wrist-flick, and only realised the truth when the noose settled over his shoulders and a sharp jerk flung him from his feet. Nevertheless, even as he fell, he pulled the trigger, but the bullet went wide.

"Young hell-cat," snarled the rancher, when the boy had been overcome and bound. "If he was a bit older I'd make a clean job of it. One o' yu take him into the house an' keep him there until—after."

Darby volunteered for the job, and carried the lad, kicking and mouthing boyish curses, into the building. Bartholomew turned to the others.

"Put a light to the shack when yu done, an' fetch the stock along," he ordered curtly, and, mounting his horse, rode away without another look at the man he had left to die.

An hour later the boy crept from the brush fringing the stream, and, with a sob as he passed the smouldering ruins, made his way to the big cottonwood in front of what that morning had been his home. A violent fit of trembling seized him when he saw the gruesome limp form hanging from a lower limb, and for a moment he could not move. Then, making an effort, he went on. Beneath the body was a small heap—a worn purse, a tobacco pouch and pipe, a locket, which he knew contained his dead mother's portrait, a jack-knife and a slip of paper. Scrawled in pencil on the paper were the words:

"Goodbye, son. I'm goin' game. Don't forget me. I know you'll do what's right. Dad."

With blurred eyes, and strangling the sobs that nearly choked him, the boy read the pitiful message.

"I'll shore do what's right, dad, to that hell-hound," he muttered thickly.

Then, as he had done many a time before just for amusement, he climbed the tree, and severing the rope, allowed the corpse to slump to the ground. For an instant he clung to the branch, sick and dizzy, and then dropped down to kneel by his father's body. He kissed the cheek, and the cold contact sent a shiver through him. Presently he got up, and, going to the little garden patch, returned with a spade and began to dig.

It was a big job for hands so young, and the sun was low in the sky before the hole was large and deep enough. Dragging the body into it the boy covered it with a layer of green boughs, to shield the poor clay from the earth from which it sprang, and, ere the opening was completely filled in, he fetched heavy stones from the stream bed and packed them in that the grave might not be violated by wild creatures.

The burial finished, he was about to depart, when a sudden thought came to him. Opening his father's jack-knife, he set to work. When at length he turned to leave, the tree trunk bore, in letters a foot long and deeply cut, his father's brand:

A B

There, in the gathering twilight, the white letters stood out, marking the last resting place of yet another victim of Judge Lynch.

In the corral the boy found one pony and his own worn saddle. For these he knew he must thank the man Darby, who, on setting him free when the house was fired, had promised to leave them.

"I can't do nothin', son, but they shan't set yu afoot," he had said.

Everything else was gone; and, having saddled and mounted the pony, the boy, with a last look and a tightened throat, turned his face to the wilderness.

"I'm comin' back, Bartholomew," he said aloud. "An' when I do I'll be—shootin'."

CHAPTER I

THE little town of Hope Again lay dormant under the blistering heat of the midday sun, a heat which made exertion a curse and any sort of shade a blessing. The origin of the somewhat quaint name was a mystery, but it is conceivable that the place was christened by some luckless pioneer who, having survived the maddening monotony and deadly menace of the desert which stretched to the south, was moved to inspiration by the sight once more of water, trees and the distant hills.

Hope—as the dwellers therein usually called it—little warranted so encouraging a name. A far-flung frontier settlement, it differed in no way from a hundred others of its kind. Two straggling, irregular lines of apologies for buildings, constructed of timber, 'dobe, or both, formed some sort of a street, and the spaces between them, littered with tin cans and other refuse, added to the unlovely picture. Only two of these erections aspired to the dignity of a second story, the "hotel" and the largest of the saloons—Muger's—which bore the inviting title "Come Again," and to which a dance hall was attached. The rest of the town comprised a bank, solidly built of 'dobe bricks, a blacksmith's, two general stores, one of which was also the post office, several smaller saloons, shacks and dugouts, which sheltered the permanent population. Board sidewalks made progress for pedestrians possible, and at one end of the dusty, rutted road a rude timber bridge spanned the little river, which, after a tortuous journey from the Mesa Mountains in the north, supplied the town with water and went on to lose itself in the sands of the desert less than a mile away. And over everything an almost impalpable dust cast a grey-white mantle..

The town appeared to be deserted save for two men standing in the doorway of one of the lesser saloons. One was the owner of the place, Bent, a short, squat fellow, with a craggy face in which the eyes twinkled good-humouredly. The other was a stranger, and the saloon-keeper—as is the way of his kind—was curious about him, but not unduly so, for in the West curiosity, like dynamite, must be handled carefully.

He was a tall man, apparently nearing thirty, with the wide shoulders and narrow hips of the athlete. His clean-shaven, deeply-tanned face, with its steady grey-blue eyes and firm jaw, had the gravity of an Indian's, but there was a quirk of humour in the little lines at the corners of the mouth. His cowboy rig was plain but neat, and had evidently seen service; and the same appeared to be the case with the two guns which hung low on his hips, the ends of the holsters tied down to facilitate the draw. A furtive examination of his horse in the corral behind the saloon had told Bent nothing. He did not know the brand.

"Mister sun is certainly humpin' hisself," the stranger offered.

"Hot as hell with the lid on," Bent replied, slatting the perspiration from his brow with his fingers.

"Town 'pears to be about as lonesome as a dawg with no fleas," pursued the visitor.

"She'll git a move on 'bout sundown," said Bent hopefully, for business was none too brisk and he did not want to lose a customer. A cowboy on a journey usually had money burning a hole in his pocket, and though he ran his games "straight," Bent had no objection to taking his share of it. But he was doomed to be disappointed.

"I'll be doin' the same my own self afore then," the cowboy told him.

The conversation languished again. Bent, covertly regarding the lithe, lounging figure, continued his inward speculation. Was he an out-of-work puncher, a gunman, or both, and what had brought him to Hope, which was on the direct

route to nowhere? His meditations were interrupted in a curious manner. From up the street came a crack like a pistol-shot, a yelp of animal pain, and a volley of oaths. Then from the door of the "Come Again" saloon a dog hurtled forth as though forcibly propelled. There was a rope round its neck, and holding the other end came a cowboy wielding a wicked quirt and a still more wicked tongue. The dog, having recovered from its ungainly sprawl in the dust, set off down the street, the man following, tugging on the rope and flicking the animal with the whip.

"I'll larn yu to fly at me, yu mongrel whelp o' the devil, if I have to lift the hide off'n yu an inch at a lick," he yelled. "Take that, yu——"

With the savage words the whip cracked again, and a fresh bleeding spot on the dog's back showed where the cruel end of the lash had bitten, removing hair and skin. The yelp of the tortured beast and the laugh of its persecutor rang out together. The apparent report of a firearm peopled the place as if by magic. From doors and windows heads protruded, while a few men, more curious or more venturesome than their fellows, came out on the sidewalk, but cautiously, for lead might be flying about, and a bullet is no respecter of persons. When they saw what was happening several of them smiled. "Mad" Martin was at his tricks again.

"Stay with him, boy. Ride him," one shouted,

"I'll ride him to hell an' back," yelled the cowboy, as, dragged by the nearly demented dog, he jerked by, his dug-in heels sending up clouds of dust. Opposite Bent's saloon he swung his quirt for another blow.

"Drop that whip!" came a curt command.

The stranger had suddenly come alive; one stride took him to the edge of the sidewalk, and it was he who had spoken. Martin stared at him, a savage surprise in his beady eyes. Leaning back, he checked his progress for a moment.

"Yu can go plumb to hell," he retorted.

"Drop it, yu skunk," came the further order, and this time there was a cold menace in the tone.

Martin recognised it and knew that he must either obey or fight. He elected to do both. Dropping the quirt he snatched at his gun. The other man appeared to make no move until the weapon was clear of the holster, and then came a spurt of smoke from his right hip, and Martin toppled sideways into the dust, letting fall his own gun and the rope as he did so. The stranger stepped into the street and stood over the prostrate man.

"That dawg belong to yu?" he asked.

"Yes, an' what the hell business is it o' yores, anyways?" spat out the other, his baleful eyes glaring murder.

"I've made it my business, an' I'm buyin' yore dawg," replied the stranger coolly, as he took a roll of bills from his pocket, peeled off one and flung it down, "That's five times the dawg's value an' fifty times yores," he added contemptuously,

"This don't finish here—I'll get yu," Martin gritted.

"Better get—yoreself," the stranger warned sardonically.

The wounded man staggered to his feet and floundered back up the street, clutching his hurt arm, from the fingers of which the blood dripped redly. The victor watched him for a few moments and then stepped to the sidewalk again, whistling to the dog, which had paused uncertainly a few dozen yards away. Apparently recognising a friend, the animal, little more than a pup, of a mixed breed in which the wolfhound predominated, obeyed the call, alternately cringing and wagging its tail. The rescuer stooped and scratched its head.

"Yu shore have had a raw deal, old fella," he said. "An' by the look o' yore ribs meal times ain't been any too regular. We'll have to find somethin' to fill out them dimples."

"You coward!"

The voice was low and should have been sweet, but now it was charged with anger and scorn. In startled amazement the dog petter looked up to find that the words had been spoken by a girl, who had apparently emerged from the

neighbouring store. Despite her evident temper, he had to admit she made a pretty picture. Of medium height, her slim, rounded figure showed to advantage in the short riding skirt, high-laced boots and shirt-waist, with a gay handkerchief knotted round her throat cowboy fashion. Her soft slouched hat did not entirely conceal a profusion of brown hair, to which the sun added a gleam of new bronze.

"You might have killed him," she went on vehemently.

Instinctively the stranger removed his hat. He knew, of course, that she was referring to the dog's late owner, and there was a spark of devilment in his eyes.

"Shore I might—if I'd wanted to," he said gravely. "But I on'y winged him—just put him out of action; he'll be as good as new in two-three weeks. I take it yu don't like dawgs, ma'am?"

"Yu take it wrong—I'm very fond of them," the girl retorted. "But I don't place them on the same level as human beings."

The stranger's eyes twinkled. "Yo're dead right, ma'am," he agreed. "Sometimes that wouldn't be fair to the dawg."

The girl bit her lip, "You provoked that man into drawing his gun knowing you could shoot first," she accused.

"An' me not havin' seen the fella afore," the unknown reproved gently. "He got his gun out too, an' he shore meant business."

"An even break—the old excuse of the professional killer," she sneered. "That is what you are, I suppose, and all you cared about was adding another notch to your gun. Why, you laughed when you fired!"

With a sudden movement the man lifted the handles of his guns so that she could see them, but he spoke to the dog squatting contentedly at his feet, "Shore, I like to see 'em kick," he grinned. "Reckon I'll have to get some nicks put on these guns though; that's a bet we've overlooked, pup."

The girl glared at him with stormy eyes. "You're utterly contemptible," she said, and stalked into the store.

The man replaced his hat and pulled the dog's ears. "We ain't a mite popular, old fella," he told it. "'Less than the dust ' don't begin to describe us with her, but she shore rests the eyes, an' I reckon when she smiles——"

His speculations were cut short by the sudden advent of four riders, who pulled their mounts to a sliding stop in front of the saloon. The leader, a big, black-haired man, with a hooked nose, was obviously in no amiable mood.

"Yu the fella that shot up one o' my men?" he blurted out.

The stranger straightened up and looked at him.

"Speakin' to me?" he asked, and then, "I put a bullet into a two-legged skunk just now, but if he's one o' yore outfit I reckon yo're a mighty poor picker o' men."

The big man ignored the slur on his judgment. "What dam right yu got to interfere between a man an' his dawg?" he asked.

"I got a right—an' a left," grinned the stranger, his fingers sweeping the butts of his guns.

"Huh! One o' them funny jiggers, eh?" sneered the other. "What's yore business hereabouts?"

"My business," retorted the stranger emphatically. "Yu the sheriff—or somethin'?"

The slow drawl and the tone in which the words were uttered rendered them plainly insulting, and the big man's jaw clenched.

"I ain't the sheriff," he said, "but——"

"Yu own him," interrupted the mocking voice. "Well, that's just as good, ain't it?" And then, in a different tone: "If that fella behind yu don't keep his hands still, yu'll likely be shy another man."

"Stay out o' this, Penton, I'm ru'nin' it," the leader said, and to the man on the sidewalk: "I asked what yore business here is. Yu better not try my patience too much."

The unknown laughed. "Try yore patience!" he echoed. "Well, yu got yore nerve—we'll try that." His hands flashed to his sides, and in an instant both his guns were

covering them. "Now," he rasped out, "I can put the four o' yu on yore backs in as many seconds. Roll yore tails, every dam one o' yu—I'm short on patience my own self."

The whole aspect of the man had changed. The lounging, onchalant figure was now tense, the narrowed eyes grim and alert, and though there was a smile on the lips it was no more suggestive of mirth than the bared teeth of a savage animal. There was no mistaking the reality of the threat. Utterly taken by surprise, the four men had no option, and with one accord they turned their horses' heads up the street. Their leader, the last to go, had a final word.

"Yu got the drop—this time," he scowled. "But there'll be others."

"I'm hopin' that," retorted the unknown.

Watched by the wondering population, the discomfited riders paced slowly back to the "Come Again" saloon, and when they vanished behind its doors the stranger turned to find Bent regarding him with a look in which amazement and consternation were oddly mixed.

"What's the trouble, old-timer?" he inquired.

"Trouble?" repeated the saloon-keeper. "My ghost, yu shore have bought into a packet of it yoreself. Yu know who that was?" And when the visitor shook his head. "That was Black Bart; most o' the folks in this burg sit up an' beg when he talks."

"Is that so?" returned the stranger easily. "Well, it musta been quite a change for him to find one that didn't." And then, with a quick grin, he added: "Though I gotta admit he didn't look none pleased."

"It ain't no laughin' matter," reproved Bent. "He's got all the power round here, an' if he comes back with his outfit they'll just naturally shoot yu to bits."

"Then I hope the town's got a nice roomy graveyard an' a hospital, for both 'll be wanted," returned the other grimly.

"That's all right—no doubt yu'd git some of 'em, but what's the use? One man can't win agin twenty, an' though

I ain't lovin' Bart any, I don't want my joint shot up—though, if it comes to it, yo're right welcome."

The stranger's eyes lit up. "Yu are shore white, seh, an' yu've called the turn," he said. "I'll be on my way—for now."

Going to the corral he saddled his horse and brought it round to the front of the saloon. There was no haste in his movements, for he knew that he was being watched, and had no desire to give the impression that he was running away. But the discomfited quartette made no further demonstration, and after a leisurely drink with the proprietor the unknown came out of the saloon, mounted, and jogged slowly out of town on the trail to the east.

Quirt—for so he had named the dog—scampered ahead, chasing imaginary rabbits, and returning at short intervals to salute his new master with joyful yelps.

"Yo're a grateful cuss, ain't yu?" the rider apostrophised, after one of these ebullitions. "But don't yu be cheerful too soon; yu ain't nearly paid for yet, or I miss my guess."

The saloon-keeper watched him depart, and returned to his empty bar in a reflective mood.

"Gentlemen, hush," he muttered. "I'm tellin' myself the news: a *man* has come to town."

CHAPTER II

PHILIP MASTERS, owner of the Lazy M, was sitting on the broad veranda of the ranch-house, chewing the butt of a black cigar and moodily watching the trail, which like a narrow white ribbon, wound down the slope and across the open range in the direction of Hope Again, some twenty miles distant. A short, sturdy man of fifty, with greying hair and a clean-shaven face, on which the mark of mental stress was plainly set, he was somewhat of a problem to those who knew him. Though at times he could be jovial and care-free, he had, during the last few years, become a prey to spells of black depression utterly out of keeping with his apparent prosperity. For Masters' was reckoned the best ranch in the county, and unlike most of the big cattlemen, he actually owned many square miles of the land his herds ranged over.

Presently the ranchman's trained eye caught sight of a dot far away on the trail, and his face cleared a little. Fifteen minutes passed and the dot resolved itself into a rider, with a smaller dot running ahead.

"Must be him, but what's he doin'—chasin' a coyote?" muttered the watching man.

At the foot of the rise to the ranch-house the trail twisted and the rider was lost to view behind the ranch buildings, consisting of a roomy bunkhouse, blacksmith's shop, a big barn and several corrals. Impatiently the ranch-owner rose and paced up and down the veranda. He had not long to wait; soon the rider appeared, raised his hand in salutation, and, halting the horse a score of yards away, dismounted and trailed the reins.

"Lo, Severn, glad to see yu," greeted the cattleman. "Come inside out o' this blame' sun."

The room they entered was, for the time and place, a luxurious one. There was a carpet on the floor, the heavy oak furniture was solid and comfortable, and the visitor noted with some surprise, a piano. All of these articles must have been brought by wagon from the nearest railway point, forty miles away. The pelt of a grizzly bear lay in front of the open fireplace, and the walls were adorned with numerous hunting and Indian trophies. The host set out a bottle and glasses and pushed over a box of cigars. The guest helped himself, and waited.

"Somebody got Stevens, my foreman, two weeks ago," Masters began abruptly. "His hoss drifted in an' I sent the boys out searchin'. They found him in a gully up towards the Pinnacles; he'd been bush-whacked—shot from behind. A steady, quiet fella, hadn't no enemies that ever I heard of, but—he *was loyal to me*. The man who takes his place runs the same risk. Yu get that?"

"Shorely," replied Severn unconcernedly.

"For years now a man has had me where the hair's short," the cattleman went on. "I've handed over money till I can raise no more, an' now he's takin' cattle; next it'll be the ranch, which is what he's after. I got a scheme to beat him, but I can't put it in operation without a good man to take charge here. It's a gamble an' I may lose out, but that's why I sent for yu. What's the word?"

"Who's the man?" countered the visitor.

"Bartholomew, owner of the Bar B over towards the Mesa Mountains," replied the rancher.

"I'll go yu," Severn said shortly.

The ranch-owner's face showed relief, but he was a white man. "If yu want to chew it over, take yore time," he warned. "I'm tellin' yu it's a man-sized job yu'll be tacklin'. Black Bart is nearly Gawd A'mighty in these parts, an' people that fall foul o' him don't last long unless it's worth his while to let 'em, which explains me."

"That's all right for my end of it," Severn told him, "but there's somethin' yu gotta know." The older man looked

his question, "Judge Embley introduced me to yu as Jim Severn, but I used to be called 'Sudden.' Mebbe yu've heard the name?"

The rancher straightened up with a jerk and looked at his visitor incredulously. Heard of him? Who had not? Could this be the famous outlaw, the man who was said to bear a charmed life and whose lightning gunplay had made his name a terror even to the most hardened "bad men" of the West? The face was quiet, confident, smiling, but the steady, steely eyes and lean, hard jaw carried conviction. Masters did not hesitate.

"Shake," he said, and then, "Jim,—I reckon I better go on callin' yu that?" Severn nodded. "I guess my luck's turnin' at last. If I'd gone through the Territory with a fine tooth-comb I couldn't 'a' found a better man. Then yo're Peterson o' the YZ? But whyfor are yu takin' a hand in this?"

"Embley's an old friend o' mine, an' I had a reason o' my own. I got another one now," Severn grinned, and proceeded to tell of the discomfiture of the Bar B owner in Hope, omitting, however, any reference to the girl.

Masters laughed aloud. "Hell's bells, I'd 'a' give a stack o' blues to 'a' seen it," he burst out. "Black Bart an' three of his houn's sent scuttlin' by one man, an' all Hope a-lookin' on. I reckon that's the bitterest dose he's ever had to swallow, an' he won't forget it. Martin, too, is as venomous as a sidewinder; yu'll need to watch out."

"I'm aimin' to," Severn said. "Yore outfit to be trusted?"

The ranch-owner shook his head. "I dunno," he replied. "That's somethin' yu'll have to find out for yoreself. Stevens reckoned some were straight, but he gave me no names. Several of 'em Bartholomew sent here an' I had to take 'em. I'm givin' yu a free hand."

The visitor nodded. "Yu say Bart's takin' yore cows. Do yu mean he's rustlin' 'em?" he asked.

"No, blast him," exploded the rancher. "He just asks for fifty or a hundred to make up a trail herd an' I have to

send 'em. Like I told yu, there's a reason why I can't refuse—yet. I'm mighty relieved to have yu here, Severn; I got a hunch yu'll save me an' Phil if anybody can."

"Phil?" I didn't know yu had a son," said the visitor.

"I ain't, but I allus wanted one, an' when it come a girl I just had to call her Philipina," the cattleman explained.

From outside came a cry of "Hello, the house," in a fresh young voice.

"That'll be Phil," said the ranch-owner, rising. "She don't know nothin' o' this, remember."

Severn followed his host through the long window opening on to the veranda. The girl had danced up the steps and greeted her father with an impetuous hug before she noticed the visitor. At the sight of him she shrank back.

"Phil, meet Jim Severn, who has come to take charge here in place of Stevens," Masters said.

She did not offer her hand, and there was no welcome in her eyes. "I have already met Mr. Severn," she said distantly.

The rancher looked surprised, and the newcomer explained.

"Miss Masters happened to be present when I bought my dawg. As I told yu, I had to argue some with the owner."

He spoke with all gravity, but the girl sensed a sardonic note of amusement, and it increased her resentment. The rancher looked at the dog, patiently sitting by its master's horse.

"I ain't up much on dawgs, but I don't see no points about that one to call for argument," he commented. "'Pears to me just an ordinary dawg."

"Which yu got it—first wallop out o' the box," smiled the owner of the animal. "An ordinary dawg, that's what I liked about him. No fancy breeds for mine. That dawg is just folks, ain't liable to put on frills, or h'ist his nose in the air an' think his boss is on'y a common cowpunch. No, sir, that dawg's got savvy, he's wide between the eyes, an' he'll do to take along."

The cattleman laughed, but his daughter did not share his amusement; beneath the gentle raillery she suspected a rebuke for herself, and her eyes remained frosty.

"Yu will take supper with us, Severn?" asked Masters.

"I'm obliged, but I'll eat with the outfit," the new foreman said, noting that the girl did not second the invitation.

The rancher nodded, and then, as a group of riders scampered in, he said, "Come along, I'll make yu acquainted. Back soon, Phil."

The girl gave the visitor the curtest of bows and then stood for a moment watching them. Though she disliked the new man, she could not help noticing the easy grace with which he moved, so distinct from the jerky, toed-in walk common to the cowboy. Somehow he suggested a panther on the prowl, and she shivered without knowing why.

The men were busy unsaddling, but they paused when they saw that their employer had something to say. The introduction was brief and to the point.

"This is Jim Severn, boys. He's come to take Stevens' job, an' he's in charge from now on."

Some of the men said "Howdy," others nodded, and a few looked only, and Severn fancied that the looks were not entirely friendly. He himself was silent, watching.

"There's yore quarters, Jim," Masters said, pointing to a small log house standing apart from the other buildings. "It's been made ready, but if there's anythin' else yu want, the cook'll get it for yu. So long."

Severn put his horse in the corral and carried his saddle and war-bags to the foreman's hut. This consisted of one room only, containing a bed, table, cupboard and several chairs. There was a window at both back and front. Quirt, having sniffed inquiringly all round, curled himself up on the foot of the bed and lay there blinking at his master. The man grinned at him.

"Suits yu, eh?" he queried. "Well, it shore didn't take yu long to pick yore sleeping-place. But there's a mort o' trouble ahead, old fella, an' that darned girl ain't agoin' to make it easier."

Having removed the dust of his journey, he sauntered down to the bunkhouse. As he approached the door he heard voices.

"I don't like dawgs no time an' I'se done skeered of 'em at night," Jonah, the cook, was explaining.

"Why, yu'll be safe then, Jonah," rejoined a laughing voice. "All yu gotta do is shut yore eyes an' mouth an' the blame' dawg can't see yu in the dark. As for daylight, yu git the animile to chew on a chunk o' charred wood an' he'll never try to bite anythin' black again, savvy?"

Severn's entrance, followed by the subject of the conversation, put an end to it. The new foreman smiled when he saw the big negro shrink away from Quirt.

"I can tell yu a better plan, Jonah," he said. "Yu give the dawg a chunk o' meat to chew on an' he'll be yore friend for life. Dawgs ain't like humans—yu treat a dawg right an' he don't ever forget it."

The black man's face split into a wide grin. "Yessah, I'll suah feed him," he said.

"I expect yu didn't think o' that," Severn said to the one who had japed with the cook.

"I shore didn't," the youth laughed. "Yu see, I had to dig up somethin' 'cause I was scared Jonah would quit on us, an' he's an honest-to-goodness cook, if his hide is the wrong colour."

So it came about that when the men sat down to supper Quirt lay by his master's chair at the head of the long table, contently gnawing a big beef bone. The food itself, and the attention given to it during the early part of the meal, bore out the cook's reputation. Severn himself was silent, studying the men with whom he had to work. There were ten of them, and the foreman learned that three more were line-riding in distant parts of the range. Youth and middle-age were both represented, and Severn decided that on the whole they appeared a capable crew. One of them in particular claimed his attention at once, "Bull" Devint. A medium-height, chunkily-built man of around forty, with a heavy-jowled, somewhat bloated face, small eyes, and a long moustache which accentuated an habitual sneer. Severn guessed that his nickname was short for "bully"—the man looked

it. He was one of those whose eyes had not welcomed the new foreman. With a similar expression he was now regarding his coffee.

"Hey, yu lump o' black rubbish, what d'yu call this?" he shouted.

"Dat's coffee, sah," said the cook.

"Huh, looks a dam sight more like dish-washin's to me," growled the other. "Here we git a nice new foreman an' yu try to poison him with this slush."

Severn smiled and sampled his cup. "Seems pretty fair coffee to me," he said mildly.

"Think so?" sneered the bully. "Depends what yu bin used to, I s'pose. Stevens wouldn't 'a' stood for it—knew his job, he did. We won't get as good a foreman as him in a hurry."

The clumsy effort to be offensive was apparent, but before Severn could reply, Linley, the boy who had been chaffing the cook, took up the cudgels.

"Stevens was a good man all right, but yu shore are a mite late discoverin' it, Bull," he grinned. "I didn't notice that yu shed any tears or went into mournin' when he was fetched in."

The bully glared at him for a moment and then became heavily sarcastic. "When I was a kid they used to tell me that little boys oughta be seen an' not heard," he said.

"Gosh, Bull, if yore folks wanted yu to be seen yore looks musta gone off a whole lot," the boy smiled.

"Never yu mind my looks," returned Bull sullenly.

"I don't—much, but yore face is shore a calamity. Yu want——"

"I don't want no lip."

"An' that's dreadful true."

Severn thought it was time to interrupt the verbal warfare before worse befell.

"Masters was tellin' me that Stevens's death was an absolute mystery," he said, speaking to the table generally.

"Mystery nothin'," said a lanky rider whose name was

Bailey, but who was known as "Bones" because he consisted of little else. "The White Masks done it, I'll betcha."

"Yu advertise that idea an' yu'll be able to ask Stevens yoreself," Devint warned.

"Who are these White Masks?" queried Severn. "That's a new one on me."

"Funny the Old Man didn't tell yu," Devint said, and his tone implied that the omission was in some way not complimentary to the new foreman. Severn ignored the innuendo and looked a question at Bailey.

"They're a gang o' bandits operatin' all round an' nobody knows who they is," replied that worthy. "It's said they got a hide-out which they call *The Cavern* somewhere in the Pinnacles. A fella in Hope claimed to have bin there an' offered to lead a posse to it, but Tyler, the sheriff, laughed an' told him to go sleep it off. Well, he's doin' that now—in the graveyard."

"How come?" asked the foreman.

"Oh, he got into a knife-throwin' contest with a stranger in the 'Come Again'—an' he lost," was the grim explanation.

"They holdin' anythin' against Stevens?" Severn asked.

"Reckon not, but he may have drifted too near their hide-out," Bailey suggested. "White Masks is shore enough bad medicine, an' I reckon even Black Bart ain't anxious to offend 'em."

"Huh, Bart'll go up there an' eat 'em one o' these days when he's got time," sneered Devint, and Severn made a mental note of the remark. It was probable that he had found one of the men who had been wished on the Lazy M by the local autocrat.

"He's quite a while findin' time," put in Rayton, a sober, elderly man. "I reckon if Sudden, who cleaned up the Hatchett's Folly gang, was around, yu'd see them coyotes point for the skyline immediate."

"They say he was quick," Linley contributed.

"Quick?" echoed Rayton scornfully. "Well, I s'pose yu might call lightnin' that."

"Huh, I'm bettin' he ain't so fast now; gettin' tied slows a man up, I've heard," Devint said cynically.

"Mebbe, but if I bumped into him he should have the road," the other smiled.

Sitting at the head of the table, Severn listened to this conversation with inward amusement. So Sudden was not forgotten. He wondered if Rayton had met him before, but could find no sign of recognition in the puncher's face. He did not think that "getting tied" had slowed his gunplay, but time would show. Anyway, it was good to be in the game again.

He remained for a while chatting with the men after the meal was over, and then retired to his own shack, followed by a satisfied Quirt—the cook had seen to that. For an hour he sat, smoking and turning things over in his mind. That Masters was a badly-scared man was obvious, though why, and how he proposed to evade the threatened loss of his ranch, Severn could form no conjecture. The only clear thing seemed to be that he had picked a rough trail to follow. Well, he had guessed as much when his old friend, Judge Embley, had first appealed to him, but he had his own reasons for accepting. He grinned at the dog.

"Shucks!" he said. "Any fool can win with four aces; there's a heap more satisfaction in bluffin' through on three of a kind, though I ain't shore our hand would grade as high as that; seems like we on'y got a pair, an' I'm wearin' 'em right now."

The dog, squatting at his feet, gave a little yelp and beat the earthen floor with its tail.

"Yessir," continued the foreman reflectively, "an' I got a suspicion we're agoin' to lose the services o' Mister Devint."

The clash was to come sooner than he expected.

CHAPTER III

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast on the following morning Severn found the men assembled near the corral awaiting orders for the day's work. Devint, a man named Darby, and a Mexican he had heard called Ignacio, were standing in a little group apart, and the new foreman scented trouble. He walked straight up to them.

"I'm told yu been actin' straw-boss since Stevens passed out," he said to Devint, and when the man nodded sulkily, he added, "Yu can go on doin' it."

Into the bully's eyes came a gleam of malicious triumph; if this new fellow wasn't afraid of him, he at least didn't want trouble. He squared his shoulders and thrust his chest out aggressively.

"Huh! Mebbe there's two words to that," he sneered.

"Well, speak yore piece; I've said mine," the other retorted.

Devint scowled. "Yu got the job that oughta come to one of us," he began. "I reckon the Old Man has played it low down on the outfit, bringin' in a stranger thisaway."

The other men stood round watching. Plainly Devint had been talking, and they had known that he intended to test the new foreman. Severn's mind worked quickly. He did not want an open rupture with any of them just yet, but he recognised that he must show the men he had to handle that he was capable of doing it. He looked at Devint and there was a glint of amusement in the glance.

"What's it gotta do with me?" he asked. "Yu ain't expectin' me to tell Masters he's appointed the wrong man, are yu?"

Several of the onlookers sniggered, and the bully glared at

them; he did not at all relish being made game of, and he also realised that in a warfare of words with this man he would have no chance.

"I can tell Masters all I want to tell him myself," he said, the scowl on his face deepening.

"All yu gotta tell him is that I've fired you," Severn said easily, and then, as Devint made a threatening movement, "Take yore hand off that gun—yu haven't the pluck to pull it."

For a few seconds the two men stood, less than a couple of yards apart, half-crouched, their eyes watching alertly for the first sign of action. Then the bully's gaze wavered and fell. The foreman had forced the issue and found him unprepared,

"Like I said—yellow," Severn sneered, and half turned away.

"Damn yu," yelled Devint. "I'll——"

But ere he could get the snatched-at gun from its holster Severn's expectant eye had caught the movement, and his left hand darted out, gripping the wrist with a clutch of steel, while his right seized the would-be slayer's throat.

"Yu dirty coyote!" he hissed through his bared teeth. "Shoot a man in the back, would yu? That's how Stevens died, an' yu wanted his job. I've a mind to——"

He shook the powerless man savagely, sinking his fingers still more deeply in the flesh of his neck. Devint, his eyeballs bulging and his face a dark purple, was on the point of suffocation when, with a sudden thrust, Severn flung him headlong into the dust, where he lay gasping, his labouring lungs sucking in the air in great gulps. It was some moments before he could get on his feet, and then the foreman said shortly:

"Go up to the house, get yore time, an' hit the trail."

With an evil look and a muttered threat the beaten man slouched away. Severn turned to the others; the anger had gone from his face but there was still an acid touch in his voice.

"Anyone else got notions?" he asked.

"I go wiz Meester Devint," the Mexican said.

Severn nodded, and looked at Darby, who answered the unspoken question with a grin.

"I'm stayin' put," he said.

"Good enough," replied the foreman, and proceeded to detail the duties for the day.

"My Gawd!" said Linley, as he rode away with Darby. "Did yu see? He was actually laughin' when he guzzled Bull."

"Laughin'?" retorted Darby. "Yes, laughin' like a wolf does when it's pullin' down a calf. My oath, I reckon hangin' won't be no surprise to Bull now."

Having sent the men off, Severn went up to the ranch-house. He found Masters and his daughter in the front room. The girl was dressed for riding and her forehead creased in a little frown when he entered.

"Lo, Severn, started weedin' a'ready, I hear," the cattleman greeted.

"I had to part with two o' the outfit," the new foreman smiled. "They didn't seem comfortable."

"They've been comfortable enough till now," the girl interjected. "Both reliable men, recommended by Mr. Bartholomew."

The bitterness of this attack surprised Severn, but his voice was cool and easy when he replied:

"I shore didn't know they were friends o' yores, Miss Masters."

"I don't make friends with cowboys or Mexicans," the girl retorted coldly. "I suppose you followed ybur usual method and provoked them in the hope of a gunplay?"

Severn grinned. "An' two more notches, eh? Well, the only provocation I gave Devint was to offer him the job of straw-boss, which he declined—without thanks. When he tried to shoot me in the back I just naturally had to reason with him. The Greaser took up his end of it."

"Mr. Bartholomew won't like it," the girl said.

"Damn Bartholomew," her father exploded. "This is my ranch an' I'm runnin' it. When I put a man in charge I back his play; yu can fire the whole bunch if yu need to, Severn. Anythin' else yu wantin' to see me about?"

"No, I'm just goin' to have a look over the range," Severn replied, and then an imp of mischief prompted him to add, "I thought if Miss Masters was thinkin' o' ridin' she might show me around."

The girl's eyes met his in contemptuous astonishment. "I've something else to do," she said shortly.

Setting out on his tour of inspection, the new foreman addressed the dog gambolling a few yards in front of his pony's nose.

"The Princess regretted she had another engagement, Quirt, so we gotta go it alone," he said quizzically. "Don't look so blame' joyful—it ain't good manners; an' besides, she'd be real company for a man she liked. But she don't like us, old-timer; she's got no more use for us than she has for a boil on the neck, an' that's a fact."

* * * * *

It must have been somewhere about midnight when Severn was awakened by a low throaty growl from the dog curled up on the foot of his bed. Raising himself, he looked round. There was no moon, but the stars provided a murky light, and he fancied he saw an indistinct shadow outside the back window.

"Quiet, boy," he whispered to the dog, and sat watching, his right hand gripping a six-shooter.

Again he saw what he had taken to be a shadow, and then came an unmistakable creak as though someone was trying to force an entrance. Severn remained motionless, but for some moments there was no further sound. Apparently the intruder, satisfied that he had not disturbed the sleeper, renewed his efforts, for a further creak sounded as the sash of the window was forced up several inches. Then came a light "flop," and the shadow vanished, but not before

Severn caught a glimpse of a white blot, with two dark holes for eyes. He smiled to himself; the outfit was playing a joke on its new foreman and that was why he had been told of the White Masks.

"Dam fool, whoever it may be," he muttered. "If I'd fired——"

The sentence remained unfinished, for at that moment he heard a sharp hiss, followed by a curious sound, somewhat resembling the crumpling of a parchment, and he knew that there was a rattlesnake in the room. Sensing danger, the dog growled again, and the man, putting his hand on it, found the animal trembling, the hair of its neck bristling. He himself had an unpleasant prickling sensation under his scalp.

For a moment he listened intently, hoping to locate the reptile, but the faint slither of its body as it moved on the earthen floor gave no indication of its whereabouts. The rattlesnake, Severn knew, is a coward and will rarely attack unless forced to defend itself, but this one must have just been released from captivity and would be fighting mad. One thing was certain, he must have a light, and his matches were on the table in the middle of the room. Gingerly reaching out, he felt for his boots, dropped at the side of the bed, found and pulled them on.

This was the ticklish time. Slipping from the bed, gun in his right hand, two long noiseless strides brought him to the table, where he pawed eagerly around for the matches, nearly upsetting the lamp. He could not find them and had to move his position. Every step he expected to feel a squirming body under his foot and the sinking of the deadly fangs in his flesh. In groping about he made a slight noise and his blood chilled when the ominous rattle sounded again, and very near. Then his fingers closed on the matches and, spilling them on the table, he snapped one alight with his thumb-nail. Less than a yard away was the reptile, coiled upon half its body, poised in readiness to strike. He had just time to spring back and send a bullet into the flat, venomous

head, following it with another. The second was not necessary, but it relieved his feelings. Then, with shaking fingers, he lighted the lamp, and kicked the still quivering carcase into the open hearth. A scurry of footsteps came from outside, voices, and a knock on the door. Opening it, he saw several of the men, partially clad, but every one of them carrying a gun.

"What's doin'?" asked the foremost, the man named Darby.

"A diamond-back come a-visitin'," Severn explained. "Had to abolish it some."

The men crowded in and examined the snake, which was a large one.

"Ten rattles—he was a daddy, shore enough," commented one. "Wonder if he fetched his family."

A search of the room revealing no further visitants, the cowboys returned to their bunks, all save Darby, who lingered.

"Funny 'bout him," he said, jerking a thumb at the dead reptile. "There's gravel all round this shack an' snakes don't like gravel—hurts their tum-tums."

He walked to the window, stooped, and picked something up. "He shore meant to stay, too—brought his war-bag." He held out a leather sack, the mouth of which could be closed with a draw-string; it was rank with the peculiarly offensive odour of the rattlesnake. "Yore fondness for pets has got around," he went on. "Mebbe yu'll get a skunk next."

"I could 'a' got one to-night if I'd knowed," the foreman replied, but gave no information. Though the man seemed friendly, he was not trusting anyone yet. That a dastardly attempt on his life had been made was clear, but he had no evidence to locate the culprit. When Darby had gone he turned in again, but not without a commending pat for Quirt.

"I reckon yu'll pay for yore keep, old fella," he said.

At sunrise he was searching the ground outside for tracks,

but, as Darby had said, there was gravel all round, and he found nothing until he came to a strip of sand some ten yards distant, separating the gravel from the grass. Here were the deep marks of two heels, as though the wearer had stood there for a while, and the right showed little indentations in the form of a cross. Masters, when he heard of the incident, scouted the idea that the bandits had anything to do with it.

"Never had any trouble with the White Masks, an' don't want none," he said. "They may lift a steer now an' then for the meat, but this ain't the kind o' play they'd make. Looks more like a Greaser trick to me."

This agreed with the foreman's own view, and he left it at that. He spent the day riding the range, "having a look at the country" was how he would have expressed it, and returned in the evening to find a man waiting to see him. The visitor, chatting casually with the outfit, was a plumpish young man of just under medium height, with fair hair, pale blue eyes, and a round, youthful face which the sun had reddened rather than tanned.

"I'm guessin' yo're the foreman," he said, when Severn approached.

"Yo're a good guesser, seh," the other told him. "What might be yore trouble?"

The visitor's eyes twinkled. "Well, barrin' a severe pain in the pants' pocket I don't know as there's anythin' the matter," he replied.

"Yu wantin' a job?" asked Severn.

"I'm needin' one, which I s'pose amounts to the same thing," was the answer. "Yu see, years back, I got into the habit o' eatin' regular meals."

"Which is shore a hard one to get out of," the foreman agreed. "Yu understand cattle?"

"Cattle? Ma? Why, they raised me on cow's milk," smiled the stranger.

"Yu don't say," ejaculated Severn gently, looking down from his superior height. "They didn't raise yu too much,

did they?" The visitor joined in the laugh that followed, and the foreman continued: "I can certainly use another man. What are we to call yu?"

"Anythin' yu like, an' I'll come a-runnin' ail same good dawg," retorted the workless one with jaunty impudence.

"Right," Severn smiled. "We'll call yu 'Sunset'—the name shore fits yu like yore skin."

For a moment the pale eyes flashed and the young man's face grew even redder; then his mouth opened into a wide grin.

"Sunset goes, though my name's Larry Barton," he said. "An' I shorely asked for it, didn't I?"

Severn nodded. "Supper'll be ready soon," he told him. "Gentle Annie will find yu a bunk." He waved a hand towards Linley, and that youth's face promptly rivalled that of the new hand. "What the hell——" he began, but the foreman interrupted him with a smile. "I heard yu singin' this mornin'," he explained.

"Yu an' me shore oughta be friends," Sunset said, as he followed Linley to the bunkhouse. "We've been christened together."

The boy grinned sympathetically, but he then and there abandoned any ambition he may have cherished regarding an operatic career.

Later on in the evening Barton sneaked up to the foreman's shack, slid inside without the formality of knocking, and grinned impudently at his new boss, who grinned back again.

"Sunset, yu are right welcome," he said.

"If I'd guessed yu would plaster that dam label on me I wouldn't 'a' come," retorted the other. "I oughta known——"

"Better than to get fresh with me," interrupted Severn. "Besides, yu got company."

Larry laughed. "Shore, Gentle Annie. Now come yu to hit on that?"

"He was bellerin' like a sick calf this mornin',

'Gentle Annie, do yu lo-o-o-ve me;
As yu did long years a-g-o-o-o?'

I just couldn't help it, but I reckon he's a good kid all the same. He'll stand the iron."

"What for sort of a bunch is they?" asked the new man.

"That's what I want yu to find out," said the foreman.

"See, here's the how of it."

He proceeded to recount his experiences since he had arrived in Hope, his companion listening with a widening smile.

"Huh! Ain't missed any opportunities, have yu?" he commented. "A coupla weeks an' yu'll be as popular as a fella with small-pox." He dropped his bantering tone. "Did yu ever wonder why I was so set on comin' here with yu?"

"I put it down to yore natural desire to dodge regular work," the other grinned, and then, when the answering smile and usual retort did not come, he added soberly, "Tell me, Larry."

With a face of stone, from which all the youthfulness had gone, the other told the story of the hanging of the nester, Forby. Save for a huskiness, there was no emotion in his voice, but the deadliness of purpose in the concluding words could not be mistaken. "I was that boy; it was my dad they did to death, an' I've come back to make them pay."

Tight-lipped and with an out-thrust jaw the foreman stood up and dropped a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Yu know these fellas, Larry?" he inquired.

"I remember every one o' their damn faces, but I ain't got all their names," the boy replied. "Darby is in yore oufit now, but he done what he could an' that squares him. There was a Greaser, Ignacio, an' two o' the others were called Pentoñ an' Fallan."

"Yu don't have to worry 'bout him: he pulled a gun on me in Desert Edge," Severn said grimly. "Ignacio was

here but drifted when I come; we'll find him again, an' the rest o' the murderin' houn's. Bartholomew's got a bigger bill to pay than I reckoned, but we'll collect it—together—in full."

"I'm thankin' yu," was all Larry could find to say, and, after an awkward pause, "What kinda hold has Bartholomew got on Masters?"

"He didn't tell me, but I'm guessin' it's a strangle-hold," Severn said. "Masters don't strike me as bein' anyways soft."

"What's the girl like?" was the next question.

"Well, she's amazin' like—a girl," smiled Severn.

"Huh!" grunted Larry, "Don't tell me yu've fell in love with her."

"Bein' a truthful an' a married man, I won't," his foreman said. "An' yu bein' a sorta friend I'll let yu into a secret—she ain't fell in love with me neither; in fact, she regards my presence on the earth as an unwarrantable intrusion."

Larry spat disgustedly. "Don't start sawin' off that damn dictionary stuff on me or I'll do that dame a service by removin' yu a whole lot," he threatened. "Seems to me the on'y friend yu've made is thisyer pup." He pulled the dog's ears as he spoke, and Quirt, content that his master's friends should be his, permitted the liberty.

"A pup is a good pal," Severn rejoined. "An' now I've got two of 'em——"

"Here, cowboy, who're yu callin' a ——" began the other, but his host ushered him to the door.

"Don't yu worry, old-timer, Quirt ain't carin'," he said. "Beat it to the bunkhouse, an' remember that the foreman ain't goin' to be too pleased with yu, an' yu don't like him none too much, 'less yu know yore man awful well, savvy?"

"Playin' I don't like yu'll be the easiest job I ever tackled," Larry said, but there was a warmth in his tone which told a different story. "Say, Don, but it's good to be on the warpath again with yu."

"Who do yu think yo're talkin' to, yu idjut?" Severn

asked quickly. "I'm Jim Severn, yore foreman, an' don't yu forget it. Now, go pound yore ear, little fat fella; we'll shore have some o' that adipose tissue off yu before long."

Barton beat a hasty retreat, as he invariably did when his friend fired unusual words at him, and Severn grinned as he closed the door. They understood each other very well, these two.

CHAPTER IV

THE dismissal of two of the men he had sent to the Lazy M was regarded by Bartholomew as an act of open defiance, and he lost no time in taking up the challenge. The following afternoon found him reining in his mount by the veranda of the Masters' ranch-house. His hail brought out the owner.

"Hello, Masters," he greeted. "Come to take Phil ridin', but first I want a word with yu."

He dismounted with an ease one would not have expected in so bulky a man and followed his host into the room.

"What's the idea in firin' Devint an' Ignacio?" he asked abruptly.

"Devint was offered the job o' straw-boss, went on the prod, an' tried to pull a gun on my foreman," Masters explained. "The Greaser fired himself."

"Devint's sore about not havin' Stevens' place, an' I reckon he's got a right to be," Bartholomew said heavily. "He's a fella we know."

"Which ain't always a recommendation," said Masters caustically.

"Well, if yu didn't like Devint, I could 'a' got yu someone else," said the Bar B owner. "Where'd yu come across this chap Severn?"

"Heard of him in Desert Edge," Masters replied. "'Pears to be capable."

"Mebbe," returned Bartholomew coolly. "But I don't like him, Masters, an' he's gotta go."

The cattleman's eyes flashed defiance for an instant, and then fell before the implacable gaze of the man who was giving him orders.

"Daresay after a bit I can——" he began.

"He goes to-morrow," Bartholomew interjected. "An' by the way, I'm shy seventy-five three-year-olds for a trail herd; I'll send over for 'em in a coupla days' time."

The cattleman raged inwardly; he would have given almost anything he possessed for the power to pull his gun and shoot down the man who so ruthlessly rode him, but that would not save him. More than once the tyrant had said, "As long as I live yo're safe, Masters."

He was saved the trouble of replying by the scurry of hoofs outside and the appearance of Phil, mounted on a mettlesome cow-pony. The girl rode cowboy style, almost standing in the stirrups, and her laughing face was flushed with the effort to restrain the bunch of nerves and steel wire she bestrode. At her gay call, Bartholomew mounted, wheeled his horse beside her, and they loped away. Severn entered the bunkhouse as they passed.

"That was yore new foreman, wasn't it?" Bartholomew asked. "What do yu think of him, Phil?"

"I don't think of him," the young lady replied playfully, but not altogether truthfully.

"Shucks, then I needn't 'a' worried," said her escort. "Yu see, I've been advisin' yore father to get rid of him, an' if yu'd lost yore heart——"

"My affections are not so easily captured, Mr. Bartholomew," she bantered back. "I hope Daddy will take your advice."

But even as she said the words a doubt crossed her mind, for short as the time had been, she fancied that her father had been more his old self since the arrival of the new foreman.

Bartholomew, satisfied that she was not interested in the newcomer, made no further reference to him. From time to time his gaze rested possessively on the fresh young beauty who rode beside him. He wanted her and was determined that she should be his. Without openly making love, he had given more than a hint of his hopes. There was a

considerable difference in their ages, but, as he told himself, he was still young, and had the additional attractions of wealth and influence.

The girl's thoughts were on the same subject. She knew perfectly well that the owner of the Bar B admired her, and, liking him, the fact gave her pleasure. Though he dressed in the garb of the range, his clothes were of good quality, and he was careful of his appearance. A fine figure of a man, most women would have voted him, virile, self-assured, and, when he chose, entertaining. Though she had never given the subject serious consideration, Phil supposed that they would be married—it seemed the natural outcome—but to-day she found herself criticising her escort, and to her annoyance comparing him with the man she "did not like." For some indefinite reason, her ride with the big man was not so enjoyable as usual.

* * * * *

Late that evening the foreman heard a subdued rap at his door, and opened it to admit his employer. The cattleman's face was grim, and when he spoke his voice had a ring of determination.

"Bartholomew was here to-day, an' things has come to a showdown," he began. "I've got orders to hand over seventy-five head an' fire yu to-morrow. I'll see him in hell first." He waited a moment, but Severn had nothing to say, and the ranch-owner continued, "It's come a bit sooner than I figured, but that can't be helped. Now, get this, Bart's hold is on me—personal, but if I ain't here——"

Severn grinned and nodded comprehendingly. With the owner absent, the blackmailer's power over the ranch vanished too.

"This is how I've planned it," Masters went on. "I just fade out, leavin' no word, an' yu take hold an' run the ranch. If I don't show up again in a reasonable time I s'pose it will be assumed that I've cashed, an' Judge Embley, over to Desert Edge, will take charge as executor o' my will

and guardian to Phil, who won't be of age for another twelvemonth. Yu know the Judge, for he recommended yu to me; he ain't wise to what I'm goin' to do, but he'll help yu if yu get crowded."

"It's shore goin' to be tough on yore girl, not knowin' whether yo're alive," the foreman pointed out.

"I've thought o' that, but there ain't no way round it," the rancher replied. "If I left any message, her manner would give the game away, an' Black Bart would hunt me down. I want him to figure I'm dead—that'll give me a free hand. At Phil's age griefs ain't lastin', an', anyways, it's the on'y wagon-trail out." He paused for a moment, evidently milling things over in his mind, and then, "I've had to mortgage this place pretty deep to raise money for Bartholomew. Judge Embley fixed it for me, an' I reckon he can hold the fella who lent the cash—for a while, anyways—an' that's all I'm needin'. Ridge of the XT wants four-score three-year-olds, an' that'll give yu coin to pay expenses. Yu see, I'm trustin' yu, Jim, an' I'm doin' it on what Embley said of yu."

"Yu can gamble on me," the foreman said quietly.

"Which I am, an' puttin' up every chip I got," replied the cattleman. "Now, remember, yu ain't seen me to-night an' don't know nothin' o' my movements. *Adios.*"

They gripped hands for a long moment, and then the rancher slipped out of the shack, feeling more cheerful than he had for many a month. He was in desperate trouble, trusting a man who was almost a stranger, and yet he had no doubts. Somehow this keen-eyed, capable fellow inspired him with confidence. To beat Bartholomew and throw off the bondage he had smarted under for years had seemed a vain dream, but now he felt that it was possible. It meant risking all he had, but he stood to lose that in any case to the blackmailer.

"She's a whipsaw—cuts both ways," he muttered, and went about the completion of his preparations.

The absence of her father at the morning meal, though it

surprised Phil, did not arouse any uneasiness; he had ridden away early on other occasions, though he usually left word for her. But when the day passed without any sign of him, she made inquiries, to find that his favourite horse was missing, but that no one had seen him leave. When another day dawned without news of her father, the girl's anxiety became acute, for the tragic fate of Stevens at once recurred to her. Much as she disliked doing so, she went to Severn, but he could tell her nothing.

"He had a deal on with the XT—mebbe he's gone there," he suggested. "Or p'raps he went to Desert Edge an' couldn't make it back to the ranch."

Phil shook her head. "He's never gone anywhere without telling me," she said, and then, as one of the men approached, "What is it, Darby?"

The man looked uncomfortable. "I just wanted a word with the foreman, Miss Phil," he replied.

The girl's face grew pale. "If it is about my father I want to hear what you have to say," she said sharply.

Seeing that the cowboy still hesitated, Severn said, "Go ahead, Darby; what's yore news?"

"The Old Man's hoss has just drifted in—it's down there by the corral."

Phil said nothing, but, white to her trembling lips, walked towards the corral, the two men following. As they did so, Darby contrived to whisper:

"Can't yu keep her away? There's blood on the saddle."

Severn shook his head, and indeed it was too late, for the girl's quick strides soon brought her to where the horse was standing, muzzle drooping, and evidently played out. The reins were over the horn, where they might have lodged accidentally as the rider lost his seat, the rifle was gone, and on the saddle-flaps ominous dark stains were visible. The girl stared at them with a growing horror in her eyes, and as she realised what they might mean, a gusty sob burst from her lips. It was Severn who broke the tension.

"Get busy, boys," he said. "Hosses, guns an' grub; we gotta comb the range."

The sharp order brought the girl out of her stupor of misery. "I shall need my horse, too," she said, almost defiantly, looking at Severn as though expecting opposition.

But the foreman made no demur. "Shore, yu'll want to help," he said heartily. "An' yu know the country."

Split up into pairs and with orders to stay together, the men were sent on their quest, each couple having a section of the range to cover. Phil was coupled with Rayton, one of the older hands, while Severn, the last to leave, was alone, save for his dog. He had allotted himself the task of searching the country towards the Pinnacles, where Stevens' body had been found.

Turning things over in his mind as he rode, he had to confess himself puzzled. The return of the horse was unexpected, for in the cattle country no man deliberately sets himself afoot, and this, with the bloodstains and missing rifle, seemed to point to an unexpected disturbance of Masters' plans. Had he met the fate of the old foreman, and, if so, who was the assassin? Clearly Black Bart could not be involved, since his interests depended upon the ranch-owner being alive. Had Masters unknowingly incurred the enmity of the mysterious White Masks? Impatiently he dismissed the hopeless problem from his mind and set himself to the task in hand.

But his search proved abortive, and when he returned to the Lazy M, it was to find that the others had also been unsuccessful. Day after day the hunt went on, messengers being sent to Hope and Desert Edge, but no trace could be found of the missing man. It was early on the morning of the sixth day that Severn, going to the ranch-house, found Bartholomew and Phil on the veranda. The big man was explaining that he had been away, and had only just heard of her trouble. His face settled into a scowl when he saw the foreman.

"Yu can have my outfit if yu want it, Phil," he said.

"Beats me where he can have got to. S'pose yore fellas have covered the ground pretty well?" This to Severn, who nodded. "Can't see much good in searchin' any more," the visitor went on. "If he's above ground, he'll turn up; if he ain't——" He shrugged his shoulders expressively, and suddenly darted a question at the foreman. "Yu got any ideas about it?"

"No, I'm in the dark," Severn replied, meeting the keen gaze unconcernedly, and Bartholomew turned again to the girl.

"Nothin' to do but carry on an' hope for the best," he said. "An', by the way, yore father promised me seventy-five three-year-olds to fill up a trail herd."

"You will see they are delivered," the girl directed Severn.

"What price yu payin'?" asked the foreman.

Black Bart's face darkened. "There ain't no question of price," he said. "The cows are in part payment of a debt," he added, to Phil.

"Got any writin' to prove that?" Severn persisted.

"What the hell's that gotta do with yu?" stormed the other. "Yu've had yore orders."

"I ain't takin' orders—certainly not from yu," came the cool retort. "I'm in charge, an' while I'm willin' to study Miss Masters' wishes in reason, I ain't handin' over property I'm responsible for on the say-so of any man, 'cept the owner."

"Yo're in charge, huh?" jeered Bartholomew. "Well, now yu ain't—Miss Masters is firin' yu right away."

The foreman looked at the girl. Her face was flushed, her lips trembling, and it was evident that she was content to let the rancher speak for her.

"That's somethin' she can't do," Severn said quietly.

"Can't, eh?" Bartholomew sneered. "The ranch ain't hers, I s'pose?"

"Yore s'pos'n is correct," the other pointed out. "It don't belong to her untl' her father's death is proved, an'

only then when she's of age. Masters put me here an' I'm stayin' put, an' that's somethin' yu can bet high on."

There was a cold finality in his tone, and, having delivered this ultimatum, he turned and went about his business. Bartholomew stared after him for a moment, and then said to the girl:

"That fella is due for a lesson, an' I'm goin' to see that he gets it. Yu leave him to me an' don't yu worry."

Long after her visitor had gone, Phil sat trying to size up the situation. All through the week, grief over her father's disappearance, and the consequent hard riding—for she had done her share with the men—had driven every other consideration from her mind. But the clashing of wills she had just witnessed had brought her position home to her. Though familiar with the daily routine work of the ranch, she knew nothing of the business side, and greatly as she resented Severn's calm assumption of authority, she was dimly conscious of a sense of relief. But she would not admit it; she hated him, of course, and she would go on hating until Bartholomew succeeded in getting rid of him, a task in which she mentally promised him her hearty support.

CHAPTER V

Two weeks passed without news of the missing rancher, and the regular routine had been resumed at the Lazy M. The new foreman's handling of Devint had, as he intended, convinced the other men that he was not one to be trifled with, and this, added to the very evident fact that he knew his job, eliminated any further opposition. Phil, though she persisted in regarding him as an overbearing, tyrannical bully, had to admit that he could handle men.

An incident which added to the foreman's prestige happened during the round-up of the small herd destined for the XT ranch. Severn and Darby were combing the brush-covered side of a small valley, and had driven a steer into the open, when it turned and dashed for cover again. Darby spurred to intercept it, and was on the point of succeeding when his pony put its foot into a hole, went down, and flung the unprepared rider headlong, full in the path of the steer. Range cattle have no fear of a man on foot, and a tragedy appeared to be inevitable.

Quick as thought Severn acted. He dared not shoot, for the fallen cowboy was in a direct line. Two jumps brought his horse alongside the steer, and dropping from the saddle on to its neck he slid round under, gripping the great horns and putting all his weight into an effort to twist the animal's head sideways. Again and again the maddened brute endeavoured to rid itself of the clinging incubus, but the man hung on, beads of cold sweat on his forehead and every muscle alive with pain. Forced backwards by the hampered rushes of the steer, he dug his heels into the ground, clamped his jaw, and gripped for dear life. Slowly the iron pressure told its tale, and the beast's head turned until it had to choose between a tumble and a broken neck.

No sooner was it down than it was up again, snorting

defiance, pawing the ground, head swaying from side to side as with flaming eyes it looked for the cause of its downfall. It saw Severn, weak and spent, making for his horse, and with a rageful bellow was about to charge when Darby's rope settled over its horns, the pony braced back, and the steer fell heavily. This time it rose slowly, and Darby, seeing that his foreman was now safe in the saddle, twitched the loop free; the steer, a sadder and wiser animal, lumbered off to join the rest of the herd.

"I'm mighty obliged to yu," Darby said awkwardly. "When I saw that devil a'most on top o' me, I guessed it was for me for the Golden Gates."

"It don't need speakin' about," Severn replied. "All in the day's work, an' I can't afford to lose a hand just now."

Darby answered his foreman's grin with another. "Well, I won't talk no more about it, but I ain't forgettin' it, an' I'll be hopin' for a chance to even the score," he said. "Neatest bit o' bulldoggin' I ever seen."

"How long yu been on the Lazy M?" asked the foreman, deliberately switching the conversation.

"'Bout twelve months. Masters was short-handed, and Bart let him have two-three riders."

"Yu didn't seem anxious to go back to the Bar B."

"Yo're shoutin'. I don't like some o' Bart's ways, an' Penton—his foreman—is a skunk."

The words were spoken in an ordinary tone as though merely explanatory, and the foreman was disposed to think they were meant, but Darby might be acting a part, and he was taking nothing for granted. He did not continue the conversation.

Severn received a surprise in the morning when Jonah's wife, Dinah, who acted as cook and housekeeper at the ranch-house, came to his shack with a message that "Missy Masters wanted for to see him." He found her waiting in the big room. She was looking pale, and there were dark shadows under her eyes, which showed that the stress of the past two weeks was taking its toll.

"I hear you are getting a herd together," she said. "I presume it is for Mr. Bartholomew?"

"No," Severn replied. "It is for Ridge of the XT. Yore father had arranged the sale, an' I need the money."

"You need it?" she queried sarcastically.

"Certainly; I gotta pay wages an' expenses," the man retorted. "P'raps I oughta said 'we,' but it comes to the same thing."

"Please don't deliver the cattle until I return; I am going to Desert Edge," the girl said coldly.

Somewhat to her disappointment he betrayed no curiosity. All he said was, "Yu can't ride there alone." She waited, wondering if he would have the temerity to offer himself as escort, and framing a crushing refusal, but again her hopes failed to fructify. "I can spare Barton," he said.

Thus it came about that some time later the girl and Larry were riding at a good road gait over the Desert Edge trail. At first the cowboy had kept a little in the rear until Phil, tired of her own company, had requested him to keep pace with her. In truth she liked the look of the new hand, whose rotundity of face and figure somehow gave him such a harmless appearance. He had little of the awkward shyness the average cowpuncher was afflicted with in the presence of all but some women. When she asked him if he liked the ranch, he said it was a "humdinger," but when she put the same query about the foreman, he did not reply either so quickly or so enthusiastically.

"He's certainly wise to his work," he allowed cautiously. "But he ain't no easy fella to satisfy. Yu see, Miss, he 'pears to want things done just so, an' he's liable to raise Cain an' Abel if they ain't."

"Obstinate and a bully," the girl summarised.

Larry squinted at her sideways and choked on a chuckle. "I wouldn't call him obstinate—though mebbe he's a bit sot in his ideas," he said.

"He looks to me like a professional gunman," the lady said contemptuously.

"Might be, o' course," Larry agreed, "but I'd say not; that sort is usually mean about the eyes. Alla'same, I reckon a gent who pulled a gun on him would likely find hisself a trifle late."

"And because of his dexterity he can dictate to others. Why, it amounts to this—that the man with the slowest brain and the quickest pistol-hand might rule the country," was her scornful reply.

Larry grinned at her. "Yo're supposin' an impossibility," he said. "To shoot fast a man has to think fast. There's been good an' bad gunmen a-plenty, but I reckon all of 'em had their uses."

He went on to talk to her of killers and gun-fights, of Wild Bill Hickok, Slade, Sudden, and others, of the bad old times in Abilene and Dodge, and tried to show her the big part these men and their like had played in the settlement of the country. And when she protested that the law was there to punish evil-doers, he laughed.

"What's the use o' the law to a dead man?" he asked. "No, ma'am, in those parts an' in these right now a man's gotta have his law handy on his hip, where he can get action on her speedy. Me, I'm a peaceable fella, but I like to know I got the means to protect m'self, yu betcha."

Phil looked at the ruddy, boyish face of her companion, and smiled at his warlike sentiments. She would have been greatly astonished had she been told that this "peaceable fella" had, in the course of his duty, dealt death or disablement to several of his fellow-beings. When a little later he shot a rattlesnake which seemed disposed to dispute their right of way, she noticed that he did not appear to take any aim, and commented on the fact.

"Aim?" he repeated. "Course not. S'pose that rattler had been a jasper after my hide; why, he'd blow me to bits while I'm aimin'. When yu drawed my attention to the snake, yu just pointed with yore finger, an' I pointed with my gun, an' that's all there is to short-range shootin'. O' course, when yo're a ways off, it's different."

With conversation of this kind he kept her amused and interested until they reached their destination. Desert Edge was a replica of Hope Again, but on a larger scale, plus a railway depôt and pens where the cattle could await shipment. Though Phil had visited the place several times on her way to the East, she had but little knowledge of it. An inquiry of a shock-headed man, whose hand went instinctively to remove a hat he was not wearing, elicited the information she desired—the whereabouts of Judge Embley.

"The Judge rooms with Widow Casey, nex' door to the Cactus Saloon," the man said. "I'm bettin' he's to home 'bout now."

The Judge, whose title was official and not one of courtesy only, was a tall man of sixty, with a square, rugged but kindly face, and an unruly mop of grey hair which brush and comb were powerless to subdue. He was generally respected in the county as one who was "straight," devoid of fear, and possessed of a certain dexterity in the use of a two-barrelled derringer which reposed in a shoulder-holster where it was easily accessible. He was in his shirt-sleeves when his landlady entered the apartment which served as sitting-room and office, with the information that a young lady wished to see him. Slipping on his long black coat, he laid aside his cigar and greeted his visitor with a smile.

"So you are Philip Masters' little girl, eh?" he said when she had told her name. "No news of your father yet, I suppose?" And when she shook her head, he added, "Well, well, it's too soon to despair yet, you know. Now sit down and tell me how I can help you."

The girl took the chair he placed for her; she liked the old man at once, and felt that he could be trusted.

"I've been looking through Daddy's papers," she began, "and I found one saying that if anything happened to him"—her voice shook a little—"I was to come and see you."

"Quite right," the Judge said. "I've had the handling of your father's business for some years now, and a few months ago I drew up his will, under the terms of which I

now become your guardian. May I say that while I deplore the necessity, I'm very proud of the position." He bowed with an old-fashioned courtesy which gave point to the compliment. Then, seeing that she did not quite understand, he added, "It amounts to this, until your father returns or we have definite news concerning him, I stand *in loco parentis* as we lawyers phrase it, or, in plain English, I take his place until you are of age."

The girl was silent, pondering. "And suppose—I wanted—to get married," she said slowly. "Your consent would be necessary?"

The shrewd old eyes under the bushy brows twinkled a little. "I am afraid that is so," he admitted. "The will specially provides for such a contingency, and, failing my consent, your inheritance is reduced to a small annual income. What reason your father had for inserting that clause I cannot say, but apparently he regarded it as important."

Again the girl was silent. She had vaguely thought of marriage with Bartholomew as a means of ousting Severn from the position of authority he had assumed, if all else failed. Had the clause been directed at the owner of the Bar B? Her father had always been friendly with the big man, but she had begun to suspect lately that he did not like him.

"If you are concerned about the conduct of the ranch, you need not be," the Judge remarked. "You have a good foreman."

"I don't like him," Phil said bluntly. "He acts as if the place belonged to him."

"He represents the owner, and he's there to give orders," Embley reminded her.

"Yes, but not to me," the girl retorted hotly.

"Has he done so?" the Judge queried.

The girl hesitated. "Well, no, not exactly," she admitted. "but he refused to obey my instructions." She related the incident regarding the steers Bartholomew had asked for.

"He was entirely right," the old man said gravely. "Those beas's represent a large sum of money for which his employer would hold him responsible. Why should he hand them over on the bare word of a stranger? I am fairly conversant with your father's affairs, and I know of no debt to this man Bartholomew. I may tell you that I recommended Severn to your father, and I am pleased to find that he is justifying my confidence."

His tone was kindly, but in it there was a note of determination which told her that it would be useless to suggest the foreman's dismissal, as she had been on the point of doing. The astute old lawyer had divined this, and had cleverly saved both her and himself the pain of a refusal. Also, his reference to Bartholomew had made it plain that he did not entertain a high opinion of the owner of the Bar B ranch. Bitterly aware of a fruitless errand, she stood up to go; the Judge misread her doleful expression.

"Now, my dear, don't assume the worst," he said. "I am having inquiries made in all the outlying towns, and I've no doubt we shall hear of your father before very long. Come or send to me if you are in any difficulty, and—you can trust your foreman."

Larry had a very silent companion on the ride back to the ranch, and in truth the girl had plenty to occupy her thoughts. She had set out in the morning full of hope that the Judge would be able to establish her authority and set her masterful foreman in his place, or, better still, out of it, and instead he had only given her a fuller realisation of her helplessness. Mainly the visit had been a gesture of revolt against Severn, and it failed. Her heart grew hot within her at the thought of this cool, confident stranger controlling her and her property. At least he should get no help from her, and Bartholomew was on her side and would know how to deal with him.

When the owner of the Bar B came over on the following morning, she told him enough of her conversation with the Judge to let him understand her position, and though he

concealed his chagrin fairly well, he was frowning heavily when she finished.

"Wonder why yore dad put that old fool Embley in the saddle?" he speculated. "There's somethin' funny behind all this. We gotta watch out, girl; it may be a frame-up."

"How do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, I don't say it's so, but listen to this," the rancher replied. "Embley draws up yore father's will an' gets himself made executor an' yore guardian. Stevens is rubbed out, an' he introduces Severn. Then yore dad vanishes an' Embley an' Severn get control o' the best ranch in the county. Say, I'm bettin' yu can't marry without the Judge's consent, eh?"

"Not until I'm of age," the girl admitted.

"I knew it," Bartholomew cried. "Damn 'em, they've got every hole stopped. Don't yu see how it all fits in? When they've got control o' the ranch, Severn makes up to yu—" The girl smiled wryly, and he guessed her thought. "Don't make no mistake—some men think the only way to attract a woman is to hold her off an' ride her on the curb. I'll lay the Judge would say 'yes' to that proposition fast enough, but we won't give him the chance, eh, Phil? We'll beat Mister Severn in spite o' the stacked deck. How's he fixed for funds?"

"He's selling four-score head to Ridge."

"When is he sendin' 'em up?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"Good enough," the big man grinned. "That'll give me time to put a little crimp in his plans."

She did not ask what he intended to do; she suspected that he would in some way prevent the delivery of the cattle, so that Severn would not get the cash he would be needing, but her resentment against the man made her blind to the fact that she might be working in opposition to her own interest. Bartholomew's specious reasoning had so poisoned her mind that she was ready to believe in the reality of the vile plot he had outlined, and to do anything to circumvent it.

CHAPTER VI

A SOILED, folded scrap of paper of the kind a storekeeper might use to wrap up a parcel, and on it, pencilled in rude capital letters, the following message :

"If yu take the X T herd through Skull Canyon yu'll lose it.—A Friend."

Severn had found it thrust under the door of his shack on the morning of the second day after Phil's visit to Desert Edge. Sardonicly he wondered as to the identity of the unknown "friend." Was it an attempt to delay the delivery of the herd, or to force him to choose another route? Thrusting the warning into his pocket, he went to the bunkhouse in search of Darby.

"Is Skull Canyon on the trail to the X T?" he asked, watching the man closely.

"Shore—'bout halfway," was the reply. "The trail to Ridge's takes a turn there, an' cuts into the rough country around the lower slopes o' the Pinnacles. She's good enough goin' allasame."

"Tell the boys we'll make the drive to-morrow 'stead o' to-day," Severn said.

"One day's good as another, I guess," the man replied, and his expression told the foreman nothing.

Severn nodded, got his horse, and followed by Quirt, rode away on the northern trail; he meant to have a look at the ground himself. The X T was twenty miles from the Lazy M, and for nearly half the distance the trail passed over the open range; then, as Darby had said, it took a turn and plunged into a network of low wooded slopes, ridges and ravines. It was, however, well-defined, wide and practicable

for cattle, being in fact, the route used by Ridge when he drove his herds to Desert Edge.

Severn had left the open country, and was passing through a shallow basin, when from a point in the brush covering the upper rims came a ballooning jet of smoke followed by the flat report of a rifle, and a bullet whistled viciously past his ear. Instantly he swung his horse, raced up the opposite slope, and dived into the undergrowth, followed by another bullet, which clipped the brim of his hat. Dismounting, he tied the animal where a questing shot would be unlikely to find it, ordered the dog to lie down, and, taking his rifle, made his way back to the open. His face was grim, and promised little mercy for the bushwhacker. Flinging himself at full length in a slight hollow, he poked his rifle forward and fired at the spot the shots had come from, which he had taken care to mark down. An answering shot from a point ten yards away showed that the unknown assailant was taking no chances.

"Still there, huh?" Severn grunted. "Well, friend, we'll try a little trick on yu. P'raps yu ain't so smart, after all."

Wriggling backwards until he was able to stand up without disturbing the foliage, he went and fetched the rope from his saddle. Tying one end to the root of a small, thick bush, he crept away and lay down, rifle cuddled to his cheek in readiness to fire. Then with his right hand he twitched the rope, shaking the bush to which it was attached. Instantly a shot came from across the basin, and with the speed of thought itself he pumped three bullets into the thinning smoke, aiming each a shade to the left of the preceding one. No reply came, and he shook the bush again without eliciting any. Suspecting that the other man might have tumbled to the ruse and be playing a trick on him in turn, he lay quiet for a while, and then fired again. Nothing happened, and Severn got up and went to his horse.

"I either got him or scared him off, Quirt," he said.

"We'll go an' see, but not bein' of a confidin' nature, we'll go cautious-like."

Leading the horse through the brush, he skirted round the basin until he came to the spot from whence the ambusher had last fired. A horse tied to a tree whinnied as they approached, and a dozen yards away a man lay, face downwards and arms asprawl, behind a clump of brush. In the upturned heel of one boot was a cross formed with nails. Turning the body over, Severn saw that it was Ignacio. A bullet had perforated his throat.

"Masters was right, an' I kinda thought it my own self," Severn muttered. "Well, yu won't go rattler-huntin' no more, yu coyote. Wonder if yu was layin' for me, or it yu just grabbed Mister Opportunity?"

Methodically he searched the dead man, but found only a few coins, some tobacco, and a scrap of paper. Half of this had been torn away, but on the remainder he read the words:

"... yore last chance. I got no use for Bunglers.
The Mask."

"Huh! Seems I may 've been steppin' on the toes o' these folk without knowin' it," Severn commented. "He didn't oughta used that capital B, 'specially when he makes 'em thataway."

Putting the paper carefully in a pocket, he picked up the ambusher's rifle. It was a Winchester repeater, and on one side of the stock were the letters P. M., made of tiny silver nails driven into the wood.

"Philip Masters," muttered the finder. "Now how in Hades did the Mexican get this?"

He examined the dead man's pistol and found that it was a .45. In all probability Masters used a .44, which would take the same cartridge as his rifle. Severn shook his head dubiously; he did not like the look of things. With a puzzled frown he mounted and continued his journey to Skull Canyon. He soon recognised it—a deep, narrow gulch, with sharply-sloping, rocky sides covered with clumps

of stunted shrubs. It was an ideal spot to waylay the herd, for the cattle could not spread, there was plenty of cover for the attackers, and practically none for the attacked. One glance was enough; the foreman turned his horse and rode slowly back.

That evening, in the seclusion of his own quarters, he told Larry of the day's events, omitting the name of the would-be assassin. His friend's comment was characteristic.

"Well, they say fools is lucky," he said.

"They must be, or yu would 'a' been wearin' wings long ago," Severn retorted.

"Two shots at yu in the open, an' missed," Sunset went on. "Course yu was jumpin' when he fired the second."

"I shore wasn't stoppin' to pick flowers," grinned the other. "I didn't look to be bushwhacked there, neither."

"D'yu reckon Stevens an' Masters did?" asked Larry sarcastically.

"Masters may turn up again," the foreman stated, though without much conviction in his tone.

"Betcha fifty he don't," said Larry eagerly.

Severn looked at him reproachfully. "Yu make me think of old 'Betcha' Brown—a chap I knew in Tucson," he said. "He'd gamble on anythin'—mad about it. If yu wouldn't bet his way, he'd turn round an' bet yourn—any old how yu liked. It finished him."

"How come?" asked Larry, beguiled into interest by the foreman's serious demeanour.

"Brown got considerable shot up one day, an' when Adams, the sawbones, had patched him up, he says, 'I'm pretty bad, doc, ain't I?' 'Oh, yo're liable to pull through,' replies Adams. 'Betcha five hundred I don't,' says Brown, like a flash. Well, the doc reckons it's a shore thing an' takes him up, knowin' he ain't hurt too terrible, an' figurin' a man will do his best to save his own life. Yu can lay the patient has all the care an' attention possible; that pill-slinger fussed over him like a hen with one chick, but he don't show no improvement, an' the doc nearly

scratched hisself baldheaded tryin' to find new ways o' treatin' him." All the town is bettin' on the struggle. The weeks string along an' there ain't no result. One day the patient perks up an' the doc thinks he's winnin'; the next he's wuss, an' the doc's in despair. Yessir, that medico is shorely worn to a shadow. But it ain't no use, an' one mornin' when he calls, Brown looks at him with a glint of a smile an' says, 'Doc, I've give yu a run for yore money, but I'm down to my last chip, an' I gotta collect on that bet.' An' he passes out, right then. To this day Adams reckons he'd have saved him but for the bet; old Brown couldn't resist the chance to win a wager. It shore oughta be a lesson to yu, Sunset."

The drawling voice ceased, and the listener looked at his friend in open admiration. "Yo're wastin' yore talents thumpin' beef," he said. "Yu oughta be a politician. If I could lie like yu——" He went off at a tangent. "Did yu know that bushwhackin' skunk?"

"Yeah, it was Ignacio," was the reply.

Larry whistled. "S'pose yu left him there," he suggested.

"No, I put him where he helped to put yore dad, an' cut a coupla notches on the tree," Severn said. "That'll get 'em guessin'."

"Tally two for the 4B," the boy said caustically. "I'm thankin' yu, Jim."

"Shucks! He was shootin' at me," the foreman reminded him. "What yu got to tell me about the outfit?"

"I reckon they're all pretty straight bar one—that fella Geevor, just in from ridin' the line. He's one o' Bart's men, an' *I've seen him afore*." Severn nodded understandingly. "How many yu takin' to-morrow?"

"Six, includin' myself; oughta be enough to swing a little herd like that."

"Then yu ain't lookin' for trouble?"

"Certainly not—never had to yet; it allus finds me."

A reminder that an early start had to be made in the

morning sent the guest back to the bunkhouse, his curiosity unsatisfied.

"Bloomin' clam," he muttered disgustedly. "But he's got an ace in the hole all right, I'll betcha."

Soon after daybreak the drive started. Severn gave instructions that the cattle were to be permitted to go their own pace, being merely kept on the move; he did not want the beasts tired in case it should be necessary to push them hard towards the end of the journey. With such a small herd and an easy trail, he reckoned on reaching the X T during the afternoon. Mile after mile dropped behind them, and nearly half the distance was accomplished without incident.

A couple of miles from Skull Canyon Severn called a halt for rest and a meal. When the journey was resumed, the foreman, riding ahead, turned into a growth-cluttered gully almost at right angles to the trail they had been following. Geevor, stationed on the left front of the herd, spurred across.

"Hey, boss, this ain't the way," he cried. "The trail to the X T goes right through Skull Canyon."

"I know, but I reckon this is safer, Geevor," the foreman replied, and did not fail to note that the shifty eyes fell before his own.

"Well, it's yore say-so, but this is one hell of a place to get cows through," came the sullen retort.

"Yu think Skull Canyon would 'a' been easier, eh?" Severn asked meaningly.

The man muttered something about its being an open trail, and subsided. The next few miles justified his criticism, for the cattle had to be driven over ground bristling with natural obstacles. Dense undergrowth, thickets of young trees, streams, rocky ridges and declivities all had to be overcome, and the riders had their work cut out to hold the herd together. They had got over the worst of it and emerged into an open, grassy stretch when two pistol shots rang out, and Severn turned to see Geevor staring stupidly

at the smoking gun he was holding. Angrily he rode over.

"What's the big idea?" he asked. "Tryin' to stampede the herd, huh?"

"Gun wasn't ridin' easy, so I pulled her out an' blame me if she don't go off," the cowboy explained. "Dunno how it happened."

The foreman had to be content with the explanation, though he felt convinced that the shots had been purposely fired. Was the fellow in league with the bandits? It was more than likely, and Severn gave the word for more speed. He kept a watchful eye on Geevor, and presently noticed that the man's horse was limping.

"Hoss has gone lame; I'll have to catch yu up," the rider said sullenly.

The foreman bit on an oath. "Yu'll stay with us, Geevor," he replied acidly. "If yu keep yore toes outa his elbows the hoss'll soon get over his lameness."

"I ain't——"

"Straight—I know it," Severn cut in. "When we get back to the Lazy M, yu can drift, but for now, yu stay with the herd."

The shifty eyes again wavered and dropped. Geevor had a certain amount of animal courage, but he knew when he was facing a better than himself, and the man who had tackled Bull Devint with his bare hands was not one to gamble with. So for the rest of the drive he did his work, and soon, as Severn had predicted, his mount ceased to limp.

After about three miles, the detour they had taken brought them back to the trail again, and to the X T ranch without further difficulty. Then only did the foreman explain to his men his reason for the extra labour they had been put to.

"Mebbe it was a false alarm, boys, but I couldn't afford to take the chance," he said. "I'm shore obliged to yu for puttin' it through."

Ridge, a bulky man of middle-age, with a broad, weather-

worn face, met them outside an empty corral, looked over and counted the herd, and invited Severn to adjourn to the house, at the same time telling two of his men to make the visitors welcome.

The foreman had a last word. "When yu boys have fed yore faces yu can start for home," he said. "I'll be follerin' later." And to Larry, "Come to the house an' tell me when yo're ready to go."

The rancher's buxom, comely wife met them at the door. "Come right in, Mr. Severn," she greeted. "Supper's most ready, an' I reckon yo're hungry."

"I think I could eat a hoss, ma'am," Severn smiled.

"Good for yu," she replied. "I allus say that men as don't eat, don't work. No news of Masters, I s'pose?" And when the visitor shook his head, "It must be terrible for that pore child. I want Ted to drive me over, but we don't seem to get no time; I do believe the days shorten as yu grow older."

"Yu didn't oughta be noticin' that yet, Mrs. Ridge," Severn said, and was promptly told to go on with his nonsense, by which, of course, the lady meant that he was to stop.

The meal over, the two men adjourned to the "parlour" to settle their business. This did not take long, and then Ridge said suddenly:

"Severn, what d'yu really reckon has happened to Masters?"

"It has got me guessin', but I ain't lost hope yet," Severn replied. "In the meantime I'm doin' the best I can."

"If there's any way I can help——" the other offered.

"I'm obliged," the foreman said, and then, casually,

"What's yore opinion o' Bartholomew?"

"Ain't got no opinion of him," the rancher returned bluntly. "He's too uppity whatever, an' too dam greedy. Heard yu called his hand the day yu come."

Severn grinned as he re-visited the discomfiture of Bart and his three riders.

"He wa' four-flushin' an' I had a pair," he said, suggestively tapping the butts of his guns. "Has he got everybody in that town tamed?"

"He has not," said Ridge brusquely. "He's got most of 'em scared, but there's some who'd admire to see Mister Bartholomew take a tumble. Have a talk with Bent, an' count me in on any play yu think o' makin'."

Severn was expressing his thanks when Larry came to say the men were about to start. He drew his foreman aside.

"I'm agoin' to stay an' ride back with yu," he said. "It ain't safe for yu to be projectin' about here on yore own."

"Yu'll do as yo're dam well told an' go with the others," the foreman replied. "When I want dry-nursin', I'll let yu know. What time did Geevor go?"

"Who told yu? Well, it's a good guess, anyways," said Larry. "'Bout half an hour back he slid out, an' we ain't seen him since."

"Take care o' this—it's the money for the herd," Severn went on, handing him a roll of bills.

The boy bestowed the cash in a pocket. "Jim, it's a risk," he said soberly.

"Life's full of 'em," Severn said lightly. "Now run along, little man, an' keep yore mouth as near shut as yu can get it."

Larry's retort, heard only by his foreman, was neither respectful nor complimentary.

Less than an hour later, Severn also set out for the Lazy M. His chat with Ridge had cheered him, for it showed that Bartholomew's hold was not so complete as he had feared. Though he felt that the X T owner could be trusted, he did not tell him of the slaying of Ignacio, and the finding of Masters' rifle; he was playing in a risky game, and wanted to be sure of every step before he took it. Later on he had reason to wish he had been more confiding.

He took the trail by which they had brought the cattle, but this time he did not worry about detours, riding straight for Skull Canyon. He did not hurry, and it was dark when

he reached the dismal defile. Suddenly two shadows slid from behind a great boulder on the edge of the trail, and he heard a hoarse command :

"Stick 'em up, *pronto*, an' climb off'n that bronc !"

Peering through the gloom Severn could make out that two men, wearing white masks, had their pistols trained on him. With a grin they could not see, he raised his hands, and kicking his feet free of the stirrups, flung one leg over the horse's head and slid to the ground. Instantly one of the hold-ups advanced a step and said :

"Cough it up."

"Meanin' ?" Severn asked.

"The mazuma Ridge paid yu for the steers, o' course," was the reply.

The Lazy M man laughed aloud. "I ain't got it, friend," he said quietly. "One o' my men carried that; yu mighta seen 'em pass."

"Bah ! he's lyin' ; go through him, Slick."

"Ain't yu got no sense at all ?" snarled the man addressed, adding a savage curse.

"I said go through him slick—meanin' don't waste time," said the other quickly, and the prisoner laughed again.

"Clever fella," he jeered. "Who told yu I'd have the money—Geevor ?"

"No," was the unthinking reply, and then, "Never heard of him."

"Another afterthought—yo're pretty good at 'em, ain't yu ?" Severn bantered.

The man gritted out an oath, and sheathing his gun, made a rapid but thorough search of the prisoner, while the other man stood by with levelled revolver. Not finding the plunder, he turned his attention to the horse, with a like result.

"It ain't here," he said disgustedly.

"I done told yu that already, Mister Afterthought," Severn said. "I reckon yu can't be in the habit of associatin' with truthful men."

The goaded searcher snatched out his gun and thrust it into his captive's face. "One more yap outa yu an' I'll blow yu four ways to onct," he threatened.

But this was where he made a slip. Severn's elbows had been dropping imperceptibly during the search and now, with an upward and outward fling of his left hand, he was able to knock the gun muzzle wide, and at the same moment his right fist, with a stiff, short-arm jolt, thudded into that centre of nerves and tissue known to scientists as the solar plexus. Under that paralysing blow the recipient doubled up like a hinge and went down gasping in agony. His companion fired but missed, and Severn, grabbing his own gun, drove a bullet into him before he could pull trigger again. One leap landed him in the saddle, and he was pounding through the canyon before the bandits realised what had happened to them.

"Yu see," he explained to Larry that evening, when the latter came to hand over the money, "Geevor's anxiety that we should go through Skull Canyon made me suspect him. When his gun went off *twice* by accident, I felt pretty shore it was a signal, an' when his hoss goes lame so's he can have an excuse to fall behind, I knew. I figured he'd slip away early an' tell his friends I was goin' back alone, an' havin' missed the herd, they'd lay for me to get the dollars. They'd never suspicion I'd trust one o' the men with the roll, so they'd let the outfit go by. It worked just like I played it would."

Larry shook his head. "Yo're a cunnin' little fox, ain't yu?" he said. "Allasame, some day yu'll buck Old Man Chance onct too often."

The foreman told no one else of his adventure, but somebody must have talked, for the outfit got to know of it, and the foreman's reputation did not suffer in consequence. On the following morning, Severn found Geevor talking with Miss Masters.

"What became o' yu last night, Geevor?" he asked.

"I started afore the rest, thinkin' my hoss might go lame

agin, an' it did, so I couldn't make the ranch," the man said.

"Come down to my place an' get yore time," Severn said, in a tone which conveyed his disbelief.

"Why are you dismissing Geevor?" the girl asked sharply. "He couldn't help his horse failing."

"He's goin' because there's times when he's ashamed to show his face, ain't that so, Geevor?" the foreman returned.

The man flushed and scowled. "I'm not stayin' where I ain't wanted," he said truculently.

"That's whatever," the foreman agreed. "An' keep clear o' the Lazy M or yu'll likely be stayin'—permanent."

The girl, with one withering glance at Severn, stalked into the house. She did not see the look which followed her, and in her state of anger would not have read it aright if she had. She sought comfort where she had always found it as a child—on the broad bosom of Dinah.

"Don' yu worry, honeybird," the old negress soothed. "Sump'n tell me Massah Philip he come back, an' dat no-'count husban' o' mine say Mistah Severn good fella—he know his job."

This was the last straw. Phil flew to her room feeling that she hadn't a friend in the world.

CHAPTER VII

THE boss of the Bar B dropped into a chair, lit up a cigar, and surveyed his surroundings with savage disgust. It was essentially a man's room, and the bare floor, clumsy furniture, and litter of saddles, guns, ropes and other paraphernalia of the range contrasted unfavourably with the corresponding apartment at the Lazy M. Old Robbie, a cowpuncher who had got too terribly stove up in a stampede to ride again, could keep house after a fashion, but he had not the instincts of a home-maker. Hitherto the matter had not troubled Bart; when he married, they would live at the Lazy M, but to-day that event appeared somewhat remote. And it had all seemed so easy; everything was coming his way until the advent of the new foreman and the disappearance of the owner had put a new complexion on matters. He knew well enough why that marriage clause was in the will.

"He's outguessed me, blast him," he muttered, and the curse was directed at the missing rancher.

His meditations were interrupted by the entrance of Penton, the one man of his outfit who was admitted to a measure of familiarity. A thin-faced, sour-looking fellow, with clamped lips and small, ruthless eyes which read the bigger man's expression at a glance. Flinging his hat on the table, he sat down.

"What's eatin' yu, Bart?" he enquired, and then, "I saw the Masters girl in Desert Edge."

"She went to see Embley, actin' on instructions she found in her father's papers," Bartholomew explained. "The old fool's made the Judge her guardian, an' she can't do a thing without his consent."

Penton whistled. "That postpones yore nuptials quite

a piece, don't it?" he queried. "What happens if she takes a chance?"

"She loses the ranch," Bart growled.

"The hell she does, the cunnin' old coyote," commented the other. "She's a mighty nice gal, but the prettiest of 'em looks better framed, an' the Lazy M is shore a handsome frame."

Bartholomew scowled his agreement with the sentiment. "Yu find out anythin'?" he asked.

"Precious little, 'cept that Embley don't love yu," Penton replied.

"That's news," sneered his employer. "Yu didn't say yu come from me, did yu?"

"No need—he knew, an' as soon as I mentioned Severn he tells me I can get all the information nearer home—from Severn himself, an' bows me out, grinnin' like a cat."

Bartholomew nodded comprehendingly; he had met the Judge more than once, and he knew that grin.

"Severn ain't well known in Desert Edge—came there a few times to see Embley, but nobody knows where from," Penton went on. "Yu remember Fallan bein' wiped out there by a stranger? Well, it was Mister Severn. Yu know what Fallan was; he'd quarrel with hisself if there was no one else. He forces a ruckus in the Cactus, an' when Severn knocks him down an' turns away, which seems to be a trick of his, Fallan pulls a gun an' gets what he'd shore asked for. Oh, there ain't no fuss; it was more than an even break, an' the deceased warn't popular. The on'y mourners were the folks he owed money to. He was the first to go."

"What're yu drivin' at?" Bartholomew asked, but Penton preferred to tell the story his own way.

"Comin' back I took the trail past the old Farby place—dunno why," he resumed. "Folks claim it's ha'nted since the owner—disappeared."

"Well, didn't see his ghost, did ye?" the big man said impatiently.

"No, an' it was daylight anyways," Penton said slowly. "The big cottonwood is bearin' fruit agin—there was a body hangin' from the same old branch, an' when I got it down I found it was Ignacio; he'd been shot in the throat an' then strung up. Odd, ain't it?"

Black Bart ground out an oath of surprise.

"Yeah, an' on the trunk o' the tree there's two notches, new cut, over the Forby brand," added Penton. "Now Fallan an' the Greaser were in that business, an' there's five of us left, yu, me, Darby, Devint, an' Geevor. I'm wonderin' which of us the next notch'll be cut for."

The rancher laughed harshly.

"Bah, yo're losin' yore nerve an seein' things, Pent," he said. "Ten years ago: why, somebody's bound to get bumped off in that time. As for the Greaser, he warn't no-ways popular, though I'll admit it's curious the chap who downed him should have picked on that particular tree as a gallows. Now, see here, that can wait; we got somethin' bigger to think of. I hear that Severn took his herd through to Ridge an' got back with the cash, so there he is firm in the saddle at the Lazy M, with authority an' money to carry on. What we goin' to do about it?"

Penton was silent for a while, his cold eyes, half-lidded like a reptile's, staring vacantly at the wall. Presently he spoke, and from his tone no one would have supposed that he was suggesting the murder of a fellow-creature.

"Put Shady on to him—he's fast with a gun an' he ain't known in Hope, so we needn't to show in it," he advised.

"He's fast all right, but I doubt if he could beat Severn to it on an even break, an' we don't wanta lose Shady," Bartholomew objected.

"Who said anythin' about an even break?" queried the other coolly. "Shady can frame him; we're strong enough in town to see that he makes his getaway."

The Bar B owner pondered on the proposition, his face set in a savage sneer. His decision was soon made.

"Reckon yo're right," he said. "I'll fix it, an' in the

meantime it won't do no harm to sorta him that Severn knows somethin' o' Masters' disappearance. Savvy?"

"Bump him off an' get shut of him, that's my hunch," Penton said. "Who's goin' to care, seein' he's a stranger here? I'm tellin' yu, he's bad medicine for yu an' me, an' I'll feel a heap easier when he's buzzard-meat."

"By the way, what d'yu do with the Greaser's remainders?" Bart asked.

"Dropped 'em in a cleft, way off the trail, where they won't be found. We don't want no enquiries," was the callous reply. Black Bart nodded his agreement, and Penton left him.

* * * * *

It was late in the afternoon when Severn and Larry rode into Hope and pulled up in front of the bank. The foreman was carrying a sum of about two thousand dollars, and wished to rid himself of the responsibility. The bank staff consisted of a manager and an assistant, and the latter being out on an errand, the former attended to the visitors himself. Mr. Rapson was an Easterner, and had never been able to acclimatise himself. A short, fat man, his wrinkled, black frock-coat, shiny bald head and spectacles gave him rather the appearance of a parson down on his luck. When the transaction was concluded, Severn began to chat about the town, and the banker immediately declared himself.

"As a business man, Mister Severn, I make it a rule never to take part in any local controversy," he stated. "I cannot afford to. The facilities of this establishment are at the disposal of any reputable person."

He puffed out his chest as he pompously gave vent to these sentiments, and Larry smothered a yelp of delight. It tickled him to death to hear someone hurling what he termed "dictionary stuff" at his friend, and he eagerly awaited the volley of high-flown language he expected would be the reply. But Severn sold him.

"I reckon yo're right, seh," was all he said.

Barton swore disgustedly as they emerged. "Cuss the fella; yu never can tell what he's liable to do."

"If yo're referrin' to that windbag, yo're wrong," his companion replied. "It's a shore thing he'll play safe every time."

Larry let it go at that and followed his foreman along the street to Bent's Saloon. It proved to be empty of customers, but from behind the bar the proprietor smiled a wide welcome.

"Which I shore am pleased to see yu again, gents," he said, reaching for a bottle on a back shelf. "That's the brand I take my own self, an' I think yu'll like it. How yu makin' it at the Lazy M?"

Severn sampled the liquor and pronounced it good before he answered the question. "Fine and dandy," he said easily. "We ain't had no trouble as yet."

Bent slapped his thigh delightedly. "Yo're the fella I've dreamt of—the fella this town needs bad," he said.

"One man can't win agin twenty," Severn quoted with twinkling eyes.

"Awright, I said it an' I don't take it back," Bent grinned. "But the right fella, with a few good men to back his play, can win agin double the number, see?"

"Shore," Severn agreed. "How would Ridge of the X T do for one?"

"Which I should say so," replied Bent with evident enthusiasm. "He's as square as they make 'em, an' he's got friends. Yu seen him? But o' course yu have—yu got yore herd through; they was bettin' three to one agin it at the 'Come Again.'"

Severn digested this information in silence. Did the frequenters of Muger's know that an attempt would be made to lift the cattle, or were they gambling on the chance of the White Masks selzing the opportunity? One thing was very clear—someone was keeping a sharp eye on what was happening at the Lazy M.

"Them bandits in the Pinnacles don't 'pear to be interfered with," he remarked casually.

"Well, they ain't botheredd Hope none as yet, an' Tyler

the sheriff, won't never lose his eyesight lookin' for work," the saloon-keeper replied.

"I'm leavin' the findin' of them good men to yu," the Lazy M foreman said as they left the saloon.

"They'll shore be on hand when yu want 'em," Bent assured him. "An' they'll come painted for war, yu bet yu."

The adjacent store was the next place of call, for supplies were needed at the ranch. The proprietor, Callahan, a dried-up little Irishman, looked at them with snapping eyes.

"Yis, this is where Mister Masters allus bought," he said, in answer to a question from the foreman. "But I've had orders not to sarve ye."

Severn stared at him. "Then I'd better go over to Winter," he said, naming the other storekeeper.

Callahan laughed. "Shure, Bart owns him, lock, stock an' barrel, an' he'll be after havin' instructions too," he countered.

"Then the Desert Edge merchants are shore in luck," the foreman retorted.

"Aisy now," smiled the Irishman. "As I said, I've had orders but divil a bit did I say I was goin' to give anny heed to 'em. Bent is a good friend o' mine, an' Black Bart's order not to supply yu was the first I ever had from him. Now, what're ye wantin'?"

Severn detailed the various articles required, arranged to send in for them the following day, and the two men drifted out in search of a meal. In the course of it, Larry, after a long silence, made a casual comment.

"This burg ain't so composed o' tame animiles as I was reckonin'."

"No, some has got ideas o' their own," his friend agreed.

Muger's saloon, the "Come A'gain," was, for a small cow town, a place of luxury. Both the bar, which was also the portion devoted to the Goddess of Chance, and the dance hall were lavishly supplied with gilt mirrors, and there were pictures, mostly of women in various stages of undress; on the walls; the furniture was good of its kind. A long

bar, plentifully stocked with an assortment of liquors, faced the main entrance, and the intervening space was filled with tables and chairs. These were pretty well occupied when Severn entered—alone—and sauntered to the bar. Calling for a drink, he sipped it leisurely and looked about.

He knew that his appearance had provoked comment, for he saw men whispering and glancing in his direction. The only one who did not seem to be interested was a young red-faced puncher who had entered almost on his heels, and now leaned against one end of the bar cuddling his glass as though it was a lost friend, although by the look of him the separation had not been a long one. At the other end, Black Bart was chatting with Penton and Martin, but the latter disappeared almost immediately. Severn was about midway between the solitary cowboy and the Bar B group.

Idly he wondered how many of Bent's "good men" were present. He did not quite know why he had thus invaded the headquarters of the Bartholomew faction; it was largely a gesture of defiance, a "grand-stand play," as he defined it in his own mind. He did not expect anything to happen, but there was a chance of picking up information. Larry, after a vigorous protest, had declined to accompany him, and Severn smiled to himself when he saw his friend sneak in.

Men who spend their lives in an atmosphere of danger develop a kind of instinct which warns them when peril is present, and Severn had not been in the saloon very long before he divined that something was going to happen after all. Martin's exit was not natural, for it made him appear cowardly, and he would not risk such an imputation without a good reason. Leaning sideways against the bar, Severn kept a wary eye on the Bar B couple, arguing that any trouble would be likely to originate there. This was sound reasoning, but he was to learn that Bartholomew had depths he had not yet plumbed. Obsessed by the idea that he must watch Black Bart, he did not notice the entry of another customer, who slouched in, greeted no one, and took up a

position at the bar behind, and only a yard or 'two distant from, the Lazy M foreman.

The newcomer was not unworthy of attention. Of medium height, his great breadth of body made him appear shorter than he really was. His attire was that of a range worker, and he wore two guns, low down on his hips, and tied. The long, claw-like right hand was burnt brown by the sun, a fact instantly noted by Larry, who was scanning the fellow covertly but closely.

"I've seen him afore, some place," he mused. "Where's he come from an' what's he doin' here? Dasn't wear a glove on that right paw. He's a killer, shore enough."

The man looked it. His heavy face, with knobbed muscles round the square jaw, colourless cold eyes, dirty yellow skin, and the limp moustache, which did not conceal thin lips, conveyed an impression of soulless indifference, repellent, nauseating, altogether inhuman. One conceived that this man might be capable of any crime, that he would regard the most poignant suffering with callous unconcern. The drink he poured himself from the bottle pushed forward by the bar-tender was of modest dimensions, a fact the watching cowboy instantly noted.

Larry called for a cigar, lit it with the inexpertness of one who has imbibed a shade too freely, and took a surreptitious peep around the room.

"Who's he after?" he muttered. "Bet m'self two dollars suthin's goin' to bust loose 'fore long. Hello, here's the sheriff; mebbe that'll cramp his game some."

Henry Tyler, his nickel star well in evidence, followed by Martin and another citizen, promptly joined the Bar B couple, and, as though he had been waiting for them, Black Bart at once made a move for the bar.

"Set 'em up, Sam," he said to the dispenser of drinks.

As the five men lined up at the counter, Severn was compelled to move further along in order to give them room. This brought him close to the stranger, of whose presence he was still unaware. Then came the tinkle of a smashed glass.

"Damn yu, yu clumsy cow-thumper. I'll teach yu to keep yore hoofs to yoreself," snarled a savage voice behind him, and he felt a hard, round object which he knew to be a gun-barrel jammed in the small of his back. "One move an' I'll just naturally blow yu apart," the voice continued.

Severn stiffened; he knew he had been caught, and the rasping, metallic tone of the threat told him that it was no idle one; the least movement on his part would mean death. His eyes met those of Bartholomew, and noted the interest, mingled with a gleam of amusement, in the Bar B owner's face. The whole room was now silent, tense; the flip of cards and rattle of poker chips had ceased.

"Don't yu," warned another voice, and there was no mistaking the menace in it. "If that gun ain't dropped when I've counted three, yu will be. One—two——"

The stranger cast a hurried glance over his shoulder and saw that the speaker was the young cowpuncher. He had apparently got over his intoxication, for the gun in his hand was unwavering, the pale eyes were like chilled steel, and the lips clamped on the cigar gave him a ferocity oddly out of keeping with his age. The unknown's gun clattered on the floor.

"All right, Don; I've pulled his teeth, yu can handle him now," said the man with the drop, but he did not lower his gun.

Like a flash Severn turned, and, as he did so, his right fist came round and up, with all the impetus of his body movement behind it. The blow caught the stranger fairly on the left point of his jaw, lifted him clear of the ground, and hurled him, a senseless mass, on to a neighbouring card-table. The piece of furniture instantly became kindling wood, cards and chips went flying, and two of the players executed pretty back somersaults. Severn stepped forward, his hands in close proximity to his guns.

"Which? I'm shorely sorry, gents, to have busted up yore game thisaway," he said. "But yu saw how it was; I had to hit him quick, an' I couldn't quite tell where he'd land. I'm finin' myself the drinks."

One of the players who had gone over backwards climbed to his feet again and grinned as he regarded the still unconscious disturber of the game.

"S'all right," he said. "A gent what gets a slug like that has gotta fall somewheres, ain't he? We'll have to find another table; that one is plumb ruined. What was yu sayin' about drinks?"

Severn smiled widely, gave an order to the bar-tender, and turned to face an angry sheriff. Tyler was not at any time an imposing person; his bloated face and mean eyes betrayed him for what he was—a blustering bully.

"What's yore idea?" he bellowed. "Comin' here a-disturbin' the peace an' knockin' respectable folks about. I've half a mind——"

"Yo're flatterin' yoreself, sheriff; I shouldn't say yu had that much," Severn retorted, and a snicker went round the room, which infuriated the officer still more. "O' course, I didn't know this fella was a friend o' yores."

"Friend nothin'—I never seen him afore," the sheriff disclaimed, "but I represent the law——"

"Ain't yu a mite late gettin' into the game, sheriff?" queried Severn sarcastically. "When that fella had his gun jammed into my back yu gave a pretty good imitation of a gob of mud. Yu saw him jump me."

"I saw yu deliberately spill his drink an' tromp on his feet," the sheriff returned viciously. "An' if he'd beefed yu it would 'a' served yu right."

Severn smiled at the circle of spectators, which now included everyone in the room.

"Yu oughta get yore eyesight seen to, sheriff," he said. "It'll play yu a trick one o' these days." And then the mirth died out of his face. "I've seefi quite a few sheriffs an' marshals, but yo're the worst specimen ever," he said acidly. "What's the matter with this town that it has to go into the desert an' fetch in a poison toad like yu to hang a star on?"

The officer's face grew purple, his cheeks puffed out, and

his beady eyes snapped with rage until he actually suggested the reptile to which he had been likened.

"Yo're insultin' an' opposin' the law," he screamed.

"Shucks ! I ain't opposin' yu any, sheriff," Severn protested. "What yu want to do ? Set 'em up for the crowd ? Well, fly at it."

This time the laugh was nearly general, for the official's backwardness in buying anything at the bar was almost proverbial. In sheer desperation, Tyler's hand went to his gun, and, in a tone he tried hard to make convincing, he said :

"Put up yore hands, I'm arrestin' yu."

Severn, lolling easily against the bar, laughed in his face.

"Why, yu pore skate, I could blow yu to bits before yu could get that cannon out," he jeered. "See here, sheriff, I'll make yu an offer. We'll get a deck o' cards—a new one—an' have one cut each. The man who cuts the high card has first shot at the other from two paces—even yu couldn't miss that far away. That'll give yu an even break. What about it ? "

The sheriff's face palpably lost some of its colour as he heard this amazing suggestion. He had made his bluff and the other man had called it. He swept a furtive glance at the onlookers, but could see nothing but eager curiosity. If he asked for help to arrest the puncher, he would probably die swiftly—Severn's eyes had told him as much. On the other hand, the thing he would have called his soul shivered at the thought of staking his life on a cut of the cards. Fair as it undoubtedly was, the very cold-bloodedness of the proposition appalled him. And he knew he would lose—one look at the mocking, satirical face of the challenger, radiating confidence, settled the issue. A loophole occurred to him.

"Pretty cheap bluff," he croaked. "Yu know dam well I can't take yu up wearin' this," and he touched his badge of office.

"It ain't sewn to yore skin, is it ? " queried the other, and then, "Well, I didn't think yu'd jump at it, sheriff ; sorta guessed yu'd find a hole to crawl into, but just to show I

warn't bluffin', the offer is open to any o' yore friends—or his."

He pointed to the senseless figure on the floor, but his eyes were on Bartholomew. The Bar B owner shrugged his shoulders as he replied:

"That jasper's a stranger to me. I fight my own battles, my own way."

"So I've heard," Severn commented, and his sneering smile conveyed anything but a compliment. "Tell that fella when he comes round where he can find me," he said to the bar-tender, and unconcernedly turning his back, walked out of the room.

A little way out of town he waited, and presently Larry came loping up. The little man cut short his thanks.

"Nothin' to that," he said. "It was a plain frame-up. I was watchin' an' yu never touched the fella; he was there a-purpose, an' he was sent for when they see yu come in. I couldn't place him at once, but after yu handed out that wallop it came to me. His name's Shadwell, but he's generally known as 'Shady,' which shore describes him to a dot. He's a gunman, an' fast. Whyfor did yu make that fool offer to cut the cards? S'pose the sheriff had took yu up? It was an even break, the same as, if yo're white, yu give a man when yu pull on him."

The foreman laughed. "I knew he wouldn't—he's yellow right through," he said. "It warn't meant for him. An' it ain't quite the same as an ordinary gun play where there's allus the chance o' bein' a split-second quicker'n the other fella. Cuttin' the cards for first shot is a cold gamble, live or die, an' it wants a hell of a lot o' nerve to sit into a game like that. Some o' the men in the saloon who knew I was talkin' at Bartholomew, are thinkin' he oughta called me, an' that's why I made the play. Yu thought I was just grand-standin'?"

"I thought yu was bein' the natural dam fool yu are an' takin' an unnecessary risk," came the blunt answer.

"It's the loss in prestige, Larry," Severn pointed out, his

voice serious but his eyes twinkling. "Yu gotta consider the psychological aspect."

"Aw right, professor, I pass," that young man interjected hurriedly. "What about proddin' that hunk o' crow's meat yo're astride of? I'm hungry enough to eat a rattler—raw."

"Yo're allus hungry," the foreman told him. "Eatin' an' sleepin' seem to be yore strong suits."

Nevertheless, he quickened his pace. Supper was a thing of the past when they reached the ranch, but Jonah rose to the occasion, and their wants were soon satisfied. Then Severn retired to his own quarters, leaving the outfit smoking and chatting in the bunkhouse. This was the moment chosen by Larry to tell of the downfall of the killer, and the subsequent abasement of the sheriff. He related the story well, and the laughter at the officer's expense was long and loud; it takes a good man to be a successful, and a very good one to be a popular, sheriff.

"I guess Tyler was some scared," Bailey grinned.

"Scared?" echoed the narrator. "Believe me, boys, he was shiverin' so hard he nearly shook all the clothes off'n his back."

This joyous exaggeration evoked another burst of merriment, and this time even Darby, who had been listening with a perturbed face, joined in, but he was soon serious again.

"Whatsa matter, old-timer?" asked Linley. "Yu look like yu'd lost a dollar an' found two bits."

"Darby don't like to hear of his old boss bein' set back a pace," said Big Boy, who stood six feet out of his boots, and feared nothing on two legs or four.

Darby shook his head. "I don't owe Bart nothin'," he said, "but I know him better than yu do. Severn's made him eat dirt twice in public; he won't never forget or forgive, an' he's got his own ways o' gettin' even. I reckon we all gotta keep cases on Jim, or this ranch'll be shy a foreman agin."

The chorus of consent to this made Larry feel a good deal happier.

CHAPTER VIII

To Phil Masters at the Lazy M ranch, the days came and went with leaden feet, and with the passing of each one, her hopes of again seeing her father grew fainter. With the exception of the time spent completing her education at an Eastern college, they had never been separated, and she could not conceive his being alive and allowing her to remain in ignorance of the fact. Always he had been kind and thoughtful, even during that bad time eight years ago when her mother died. The loss had upset Philip Masters' balance; he drank and gambled heavily for a while, and then, as suddenly as he had taken it up, he dropped his dissipation and devoted himself rigidly to his ranch. It was then that the fits of moody depression which had so changed him began.

So far as the ranch was concerned, work went on as usual, and she realised with some bitterness that the absence of the master was making no difference. Severn seemed to get on well with the men, a fact of which she had actual proof one afternoon on her way from the corral. Passing behind the smithy, she heard someone humorously cursing a horse he was evidently shoeing.

"Stand still, yu damned animated bone-rack! What d'yu think yu are—a flickerin' ballet-dancer?" came the peevish question.

She recognised the voice for that of Linley, and then she heard the crunch of a boot on gravel, and the slow drawl of the foreman.

"Shucks now, Gentle Annie, that ain't no sort o' language for a lady to use. Why, even the hoss is lookin' ashamed."

"That ain't shame—he's just layin' for a chance to kick my brains out," retorted the boy.

"Huh, I should 'a' thought he'd know better," was the foreman's cryptic comment as he laughed and went on his way.

"Durn his ornery hide, he's allus got one for y^r," Linley soliloquised, and looked up to find Phil smiling at him.

"Where's the lady, Linley—Gentle Annie?" she asked.

The boy's face flushed furiously, and then he grinned. "It's just a name Severn give me," he explained. "Caught me singin' a fool love song one mornin'. He's awful good at christenin'—he shore ought to be a parson. Barton got hisself labelled 'Sunset' at the same time, an' it certainly tips him off."

A mental vision of the young puncher's rosy face tricked her into laughing, but she soon sobered, and said, rather severely, "I don't think it is kind."

"Why, Miss Phil, what's a name, anyways?" he protested. "It ain't what a fella's called, but what he is that matters, an' I reckon it's better to be joshed by a man as likes yu than cussed by one as don't."

"Mr. Severn appears to be popular," she said with a touch of sarcasm the young man did not detect.

"He's a good 'un, Miss, an' the boys know it," he replied. "He's got sand, an' I'm bettin' that bum sheriff, Tyler, will step careful when he's around in future."

She asked what Severn had done to the officer, and got the whole story of the happenings at the "Come Again" as related by Barton, toned down—occasionally only in the nick of time—by the narrator. Somewhat to the latter's disgust, the listener betrayed no enthusiasm.

"He seems to be of a very quarrelsome disposition," was her comment as she turned away.

"Well, if that don't beat hell," the boy muttered. "Bet she'd get hostile if somebody jammed a gun in her ribs. Gals shore are odd."

Phil walked towards the ranch-house, her mind full of resentment. Severn had scored again, and over her friend

Bartholomew, for in his joyous exultation, Linley had not thought to spare the Bar B autocrat. She could picture the scene—Severn, with his mocking, cynical smile, daring them all to gamble with him for life or death. And she knew it was no bluff, he would carry it through, cutting the cards with a jest on his lips. The other men had known it too, and under that acid test, had failed. Wild and bizarre the offer might be, but it was *fair*; she could never taunt him about an "even break" again. Despite herself, a spasm of admiration for the man's cold courage shot through her.

Passing the foreman's hut, she saw the door was open, and the curiosity of her sex demanded a peep within. The room was empty, but in one corner stood a Winchester rifle, at the sight of which she stopped as though a bullet from it had struck her. She was about to step inside to examine it when a low, throaty rumble halted her, and she saw Quirt regarding her with questioning eyes. While she was hesitating she heard a step behind her, and turned to face the foreman.

"Did yu want to see me?" he asked.

"Yes, but your dog appears to have other views," she replied.

He called the animal, which came with a bound and squatted beside him. Even in the short time since she had first seen the dog it had grown appreciably, and she commented on the fact.

"Good grub an' a lazy time will work wonders," he smiled. "If yu stroke his head he'll know yu are a friend, an' remember."

She looked at him sharply, and then did as he suggested. Quirt submitted to the caress, and again she was conscious of the feeling of revolt against the will power of its master; everybody and everything seemed to do as he desired. Even she—. Abruptly she turned upon him.

"That is my father's gun," she said, pointing. "How does it come to be there?"

Severn hesitated, conscious that she was watching him narrowly, but his face betrayed no emotion, though he was

inwardly cursing himself for not having put the weapon where it would not be so easily seen.

"I found it," he said, and, anticipating her next question, "It was the day before I took the herd to the X T. I was ridin' up that way when a fella cut down on me from cover an' I had to deal with him; the gun was beside the body."

"You killed him?"

"Shore. It was him or me."

"Who was it?" she asked, and he could read the horrified conjecture in her eyes.

"The Mexican—Ignacio," he told her.

"Ignacio? And you suggest he killed my father?" she cried, incredulously. "Why didn't you tell me at the time?"

"It don't amount to anythin'—the Greaser may have found or stolen the gun," Severn pointed out. "I didn't want to worry yu."

The girl's face was pale and tense, her hands clenched until the knuckles showed white beneath the skin, and her big brown eyes were stormy. His excuse brought a disfiguring curl to her lips.

"Where is Ignacio's body?" was her next question.

"I don't know," the foreman said. "It vanished from where I left it—complete."

"The coyotes got it, of course," she sneered.

"No, them critters won't touch anythin' clothed. I can't explain it," Severn said.

"And do you expect me to believe this—story?" she asked sarcastically.

"No," replied Severn, and his voice was hard and even-toned. "I don't expect yu to believe anythin' I say, Miss Masters, because yu have been told different, but yore not believin' it doesn't alter the truth."

With a look which clearly expressed her contempt, the girl turned away. The foreman looked after her; his jaw was set grimly, but his eyes were soft.

"The Princess continues to have no sorta use for me,

Quirt," he said, scratching the dog's head. "She's thinkin' now I bumped off her daddy an' I dunno as I blame her; she's havin' a tough time."

Phil, turning as she entered the ranch-house, saw the dog standing on its hind-legs, enthusiastically endeavouring to lick its master's face and getting its ears playfully cuffed. Her anger blazed anew.

"The brute!" she exploded, and it was very evident she was not referring to the dog. "Bartholomew was right—there must be a conspiracy. Oh, if I find that man killed my daddy, I'll never rest till he is hanged."

* * * * *

The second warning arrived in the same mysterious manner as the first, a few mornings after Severn's visit to Hope. The paper and crude lettering were identical, and even the wording had a like laconic similarity, for it read:

"If yu leave yore cash in the bank yu'll lose it.

A FRIEND."

Severn pondered over it. What did it mean, and where did it come from? The only possible source he could think of was Darby, who being at the Lazy M, as he thought likely, to spy for Bart, might be turning down his old boss for his new, in gratitude for his life. However that might be, there the warning was, and having decided to act upon it, he headed for the town. Though he did not imagine there was need for haste, he rode at a sharp pace and reached his destination before eleven o'clock.

He offered no explanation to the bank manager, but, having drawn the money in one-hundred-dollar bills, thrust it into his pocket and went along to Bent's. Several men he did not know nodded and smiled to him, while at least a couple regarded him with a scowl. The foreman made a mental note of each, and chuckled to himself. In the saloon he got a surprise, for Ridge was there, laughing uproariously at something the saloon keeper had told him.

"Severn, I'm shakin' with yu," he cried, extending a hand like a young ham. "I just been hearin' how yu threw another monkey-wrench into Bartholomew's works."

The foreman gripped and grinned. "I got a rooted objection to gun-barrels in my ribs," he said. "Fussy o' me, p'raps, but there yu are."

"It's done Bart more harm than a public lickin'," said Bent. "The whole town's talkin' about it. As for Tyler, it's made his life a misery; everybody's askin' him to cut the cards. What's brought yu in agin so soon, Severn?"

The Lazy M man showed them the warning, and told them of the other he had received.

"I dunno who sent it, or what the fella's drivin' at, but I'm playin' it to win, like it did the first time," he said. "Who's back o' that bank?"

"Well, it's called the Pioneer Banking Corporation, but I've a suspicion that's just a fancy title an' the real owner is Rapson, the manager," Bent told him. "He's been here some time an' is reckoned straight. I got a bit there I don't wanta lose."

"Same here. I'm goin' to follow yore hunch, Severn," Ridge said. "So the White Masks took a chance at yu, eh?"

"Two fellas with their faces draped did, an' that was all they took," Severn smiled. "Know anybody around here named 'Slick'?"

"A chap called Slick Renny used to ride for Bart but he left the neighbourhood over a year ago," Bent said, and Severn did not pursue the inquiry.

"Who does that old ruined cabin way up the creek towards the Bar B belong to?" he asked. "Looks a likely location."

"That's what the fella who built it thought—a nester o' the name o' Forby—but he figured wrong," the saloon-keeper said. "Yu see, Bart regards it as on his range."

"What happened?"

"Accordin' to Bart, the nester pulled his freight—an'

burned the shack outa spite, but some of us has other ideas. There's fools as say the place is ha'nted, an' on'y a week or so ago, Old Spilkins come bustin' in here with the story that he'd seen a shadder hangin' another shadder on the big cottonwood by the cabin, but he was middlin' full o' rye at the time an' liable to see anythin'."

After the customary round of drinks the men separated, and Severn, who had no other business in town, rode back towards the ranch. Despite the fact that he had plenty to occupy his mind, he found his thoughts constantly reverting to his employer's daughter. She had been spoiled, of course, but she had spirit, and that was one of the qualities he most admired in man or woman. Largely indifferent to his fellow-creatures' opinion, he was surprised to discover that it chafed him to think that she should suspect him of making away with her father. He guessed that Bartholomew had hinted at something of the kind, and the finding of the gun in his room had emphasised it.

That Masters was still alive he did not believe, though he had let the girl think otherwise; the finding of the rifle in the possession of Ignacio, coupled with the return of the horse and the blood-stained saddle, negatived any hope. Moreover, he argued that the missing man would surely have found some means of communicating with him. But, dead or no, he was resolved to carry out Masters' wishes and save the girl and the ranch from Bartholomew.

"Reckon it's a straight fight between him an' me," he concluded. "Wonder what the next move will be?"

As he approached the Lazy M he could not help being impressed by the picture it presented in the bright sunshine. The broad, grey-green slope, undulating in great waves like an earthen sea, rose gradually until it reached the plateau where stood the ranch buildings; behind these was another stretch of range reaching to the broken country, out of which rose the Pinnacles, their sides belted with black pine forests and crested with huge, jagged spires of bare rock, protruding like teeth from a giant jaw. It was a place to hold the heart

of a man, and he could understand Masters taking the most desperate of chances to retain it.

He was within a few miles of the ranch when he turned off the trail, heading for the southern boundary of the range, an area he had not yet explored. He found that the grazing, doubtless owing to the nearness of the desert, was not so good; there were few cattle, and he saw none of the outfit. Realising that his mount was tired he took things easily, and did not reach the Lazy M until daylight was fading. Outside the corral the men were unsaddling. Suddenly came the distant pound of hoofs and along the trail they could see a dark blob which became rapidly larger.

"Won't be that gent's fault if he's late," remarked Big Boy, as he watched the oncoming rider. "He's shore hittin' her up a few."

"Why, it's Gentle Annie!" cried Bones. "Must be a man after her."

The burst of laughter this sally produced had but died away when Linley dashed up and pulled his pony to a sliding stop, the dug-in hoofs sending up clouds of dust.

"Anyone chasin' yu, Gentle?" queried Larry, and when the boy shook his head, he added: "Well, yu needn't to have hurried—supper ain't ready yet."

"Yo're a nice lot, ain't yu?" Linley retorted, surveying the grinning faces around him. "Yu don't deserve to know." He leaned forward in his saddle and scanned them carefully. "Wonder which of 'em was in it?" he speculated aloud.

"In what, yu—perfect lady?" asked Bones, heading a concerted move upon the horseman.

Severn saw that the boy had news.

"Better spill it, Gentle, 'fore they shake it out o' yu," he suggested.

Linley grinned at his foreman and delivered his tidings with dramatic suddenness. "The bank at Hope has been cleaned out an' Rapson perforated," he stated.

A chorus of exclamations and questions followed the

announcement, and in the midst of it came the clangour of a beaten tin pan which was Jonah's intimation that supper was awaiting their attention.

"Come on, boys, Linley will give us the straight of it while we eat," Severn said, and led the way to the bunk-house.

The story, shorn of extraneous matter in the shape of comment and surmise, was as follows: Not long after noon—colloquially known as "third drink-time"—three strangers rode into Hope and pulled up at the bank, which was situated at the eastern end of the street not far from the bridge over the creek. They were dressed in cowboy rig, with hat-brims slouched down to conceal the eyes, and each wore a kind of white muffler which hid the lower part of the face. They were well armed and mounted.

The time was well-chosen, for the sun was doing its worst and folk compelled to face its rays got under cover again with all speed. One or two citizens saw the strangers arrive but took little notice, and were not sufficiently interested to watch their movements. Had they done so they would have seen two of the men dismount and enter the bank, while the third sat drooping in his saddle, holding the bridles of the other horses, and facing up the deserted street. Between the hat-brim and the raised muffler nothing could be seen but the narrowed eyes, watching alertly. The two who had entered the building wasted no time. The moment they were inside they pulled their white chokers above their noses and levelled their guns on the startled manager, who was alone, his assistant having gone to lunch.

"What do you want?" he stammered.

"All yu got," retorted one of the bandits. "An' pronto."

"But, gentlemen, this money is not mine—it is here on trust," protested Rapson. "I cannot——"

The man who had spoken before growled out an oath. "Can the chatter an' get busy," he said, "or I'll send yu where money melts."

The savage tone and the menacing weapon told the manager that there was nothing for it but to obey, and he opened the safe. The other robber had found a leathern satchel and this was soon stuffed with all the currency in the bank. Rapson, white and trembling, had to look on while his ruin was accomplished. The thought drove him to desperation. In a drawer beneath the cashier's counter he knew there was a loaded pistol: if he could contrive to fire that someone might hear.

The thieves, doubtless out of contempt, were not watching him very closely. Still holding his hands above his head he backed cautiously towards the counter. One of the ruffians was making a final search of the safe and the other, having apparently heard a sound outside, was listening and looking away. This was his chance, and with a sudden snatch he had the drawer open, clutched the pistol and pulled the trigger. He did not attempt to aim, his only thought being to give the alarm. The man whose attention had been distracted whirled upon him.

"Damn yu for a sneakin' hound," he cried, and fired point-blank.

With a hollow groan Rapson slipped to the floor, and the bandits jumped for the exit. At the sound of the shots the man outside had promptly drawn his rifle, and when an inquisitive citizen stuck his head out of a window some fifty yards up the street, a bullet which burned his cheek effectually checked his curiosity. The succession of shots roused the town, but men reached the open only in time to see two men emerge from the bank on the run, one carrying a bulging satchel. They jumped into their saddles, wheeled their horses, and spurred across the bridge on the eastern trail before the spectators had grasped what was happening.

"An' yu can bet yore Sunday shirt that Hope is 'bout the maddest town this side o' the Rockies," Linley concluded.

"No, Rapson ain't cashed but he's hurt bad—how bad they dunno till the doc comes from Desert Edge."

"Was Bartholomew in town?" asked Severn.

"He rode in 'bout half an hour later, an' he went on the prod immediate—bawled Tyler out for not roundin' up the White Masks till Hen almost blubbered. Bart claims they got five thousand o' his money, paid in yestiddy. He was organisin' a posse when I left an' threatenin' to flay them bandits alive when he catches 'em."

"Yes, when. Making snowballs in hell would be an easier job," commented Darby. "Them fellas'd be on good hosses an' likely have fresh ones waitin' for 'em a few miles out."

"Darby knows how to work it," bantered Big Boy.

"It's cold commonsense, that's all," Darby retorted, but he flushed a little, a fact Severn did not fail to note.

"They didn't keep to the trail very long or I'd 'a' bumped into 'em," Linley said. "Bet they turned off to the left an' made for the old Stony River bed—yu could take a herd along that an' not leave sign an Injun could follow."

Amid the chatter and excitement the foreman sat silent, seeking some clue as to the identity of his mysterious correspondent. Clearly the unknown was aware that the robbery was to take place. Who could it be? He went to his own quarters, and was still wrestling with the problem when Barton entered.

"The boys have bin indulgin' in a chin-wag," he began, "an' I'm here to say that if the loss o' the herd-money cramps yu any they all are willin' to wait for their wages till yu can pay 'em."

The foreman smiled, but his expression showed that he was touched. "They are shore white," he said. "But I drew that mazuma out this mornin'."

"Yu drew it out?" repeated Larry in amaze. "Well, of all the lucky old——"

"No, it warn't luck," Severn chipped in. "Look at these."

He produced the two warnings he had received, and explained how they had come to him. Larry gave vent to a whistle.

"Odd number, ain't it?" he queried. "Yu must have a guardian angel somewheres, Jim, an' Gawd knows, yu need one. Any idea who it may be?"

The foreman mentioned his suspicions of Darby, but his friend did not agree.

"S'pose he is pryin' for Bart, that don't connect him up with the White Masks," he pointed out. "An' it was Darby first suggested the boys should wait for their pay."

"Well, I shore owe him somethin', whoever it is," Severn admitted. "An' I like to pay my debts."

"Mebbe yu'll get a chance," said the other. "Meantime, don't push yore luck too hard—this guardian angel may be human an' want a nap now an' again."

"I gotta play the hands what's dealt me—win or lose," the foreman told him. "Yu can say to the boys that I'm shore obliged an' that I ain't forgettin' it."

CHAPTER IX

ON the following morning Bartholomew, riding a weary horse, made his appearance at the Lazy M. The posse, of which he was the virtual leader, had gone back to town. As Darby had surmised, they had lost the trail on the Stony River bed, and after hours of search, had failed to pick it up again. The big man looked tired, untidy and sullen. As he walked towards the ranch-house he met Darby and stopped.

"Ain't seen yu at the Bar B lately," he said. "There's some dollars due yu."

"I don't aim to collect 'em, Bart," was the reply.

The Bar B owner raised his eyebrows. "How come?" he asked sharply.

"I ain't proposin' to earn 'em," Darby explained.

"Goin' to renig, huh? Roundin' on me, are yu?" sneered the rancher.

"No, that was never my way—what I know I'll keep under my hat," the cowboy said quietly. "I'm just droppin' a job I never liked, an' from now on I'm playin' square with the man who pays me."

"Meanin' Severn?"

Darby nodded. His face was pale and his lips set. He knew perfectly well that he was risking his life in thus defying his late employer, but he had no hesitation, and Black Bart, though he did not want to lose the man, realised that he could not persuade him. His face settled into a savage sneer.

"All right, Darby," he said. "It's a free country, but freeze on to this—fellas as ain't for me are agin' me, an' take their chances."

"Anythin' yu put over lets me out an' I talk, Bart," the man retorted.

With a laugh at the threat the rancher went on to the house. Phil met him on the veranda and her big eyes softened when she saw how jaded he looked. With a grunt of satisfaction he dropped into one of the roomy chairs, and then turned to her with a grin.

"Phil, I'm about all in, an' it's a long way to the 'Come Again,'" he suggested.

The girl laughed, vanished inside, and reappeared bearing a bottle and glass. The man's eyes took in the daintiness of her, the desirableness of her surroundings—mentally comparing the place to his own—and his jaw firmed with decision: he would have her, come hell or high water, was his unspoken vow. He poured himself a drink, raising the glass in salutation.

"Here's how," he said, and then: "Gosh! I wanted that. Huntin' needles in a haystack's easy compared with findin' thieves in this man's country. Yu heard about the bank hold-up, o' course?"

"Yes, it was the White Masks, I suppose?"

"Well, I reckon it was, but the question is, who are the White Masks? There's somethin' queer about this robbery; two or three fellas drew all their money out just before it happened an' Severn was one of 'em. O'course, it might be it just happened so, an' then again, it might not."

"Is Rapson much hurt?"

"He looked pretty desperate. He was just able to say what I told yu, an' that the fellas' faces were too muffled for him to know 'em again, an' then he fainted. Yu got any news, Phil?"

She told him of the finding of her father's gun and Severn's explanation; Bartholomew's lips twisted into an incredulous sneer as he listened. At once he saw how the story could be used for his own advantage.

"Yu ain't swallowin' that, are yu, Phil?" he asked sardonically. "Shucks, I gave the fella credit for more savvy. He'll have to produce the Greaser's body to make that tale stick, an' that's somethin' I'm bettin' high he can't

do, for I happen to know Ignacio has left the country. Now see here, don't tell no one else about this; we'll lay low an' let him run his own silly head into the noose."

"Yu think he killed daddy?" the girl asked, a break in her voice.

"I ain't any doubt myself, but we gotta get more proof," he returned. "An' we gotta find out if I'm right about Embley bein' in with him. Then there's this White Mask business. Was Severn about the ranch when the bank was cleaned?"

"No, he came in just before supper," she replied. "I chanced to see him."

"Huh, an' he left town in plenty time to meet his pals an' circle back," Bartholomew said. "Far as I can gather, the fella that downed Rapson was about Severn's build. But that's all guesswork, an' we gotta be shore before we move." He stood up and patted her shoulder. "Don't yu trouble, Phil," he added. "Once things is straightened out I'll have something to say that I hope yu'll be glad to hear."

The gesture and the look which accompanied it made the girl flush; she knew what he meant, but she was aware that there was no answering thrill in her heart. Somehow, though she could not account for it, Bartholomew seemed to have lost in attractiveness. She was not sorry when her visitor went, and she put it down to worry. Bart himself divined nothing of this; he rode away from the Lazy M in a pleasanter frame of mind than he had been in for weeks. Things were looking brighter for him.

Severn did not see the Bar B owner, having left early in the morning with several of the outfit for the southern part of the range, where a miniature round-up was taking place, the foreman being desirous of getting an approximate idea of the number of cattle the ranch was running. It was late in the afternoon when he returned to his hut, and his sharp eye immediately told him he had had a visitor. Little displacements of various articles showed that the room had been subjected to a search, and in several spots small holes had

been made in the earthen floor, as though someone had thrust in a rod or stick. Nothing had been taken, and the foreman grinned as he looked around. Then he went down to the bunk-house.

"Anybody been a-visitin' to-day, Jonah?" he enquired.

"Yessah, dat no 'count punchah, Geevor, come pesterin roun' dis afternoon," replied the grinning darky. "Went up to yo shack an' was an almighty long time findin' I done tole him de trufe when I say yu wasn't to home."

The foreman went back to his quarters in a thoughtful mood. At first his suspicions had suggested Phil, searching for further evidence of her father, though it was difficult to believe her guilty of so mean an action. So it was Geevor, eh?

"Somebody is certainly stuck on gettin' that money," he muttered. "Quirt, I guess I'll have to leave yu behind to keep house in future."

The evening passed without incident, and though Geevor's appearance was discussed and speculated upon, Severn did not tell the others of the man's real object. Bones, who had met an X T rider on the range, brought the news that the doctor gave Rapson one chance in ten to recover. He was too ill to make any statement, and the search for the hold-ups had been abandoned as hopeless.

"Bah! Why don't they scare up a young army an' comb them Pinnacles right through?" asked Big Boy contemptuously.

"Some job," said Darby. "It's the meanest country—one o' them places Gawd forgot to finish."

The foreman did not join in the "kid's poker," which was the outfit's name for the ten cent. limit game they played amongst themselves. On the step of his shack, his back against the side of the open door and a cigarette between his lips, he squatted, gazing at the diamond-dusted sky.

"Mister 'Friend' is the joker in the pack," he mused.

"If I could locate him it wuld shore be helpful."

But though he stayed there for more than an hour thrashing the matter out, he was no nearer a solution at the end of it, and at last gave it up in disgust and turned in.

It must have been near to midnight when a warning growl from the dog aroused him. He listened for a moment and fancied he heard a stealthy footstep outside, the "crunch" of gravel pressed lightly. Slipping from his bed, he crept noiselessly to the window and peered out. The night was dark but the stars provided a little light, and he had an impression of a blurred, shadowy form slinking in the direction of the ranch-house. Hurriedly he got into his clothes, and not waiting to buckle on his belt, seized one of his guns and stepped outside; he did not take the dog. Softly but swiftly he made his way to the house, watching warily for any movement.

The place was in darkness, and there was no sign of a marauder, but Severn was not satisfied; he was almost sure he had seen someone. A careful examination of the front of the house showed nothing suspicious, and the foreman went round to the back. Here he found an open window, and climbing through, realised that he was in the kitchen. The door of this opened upon a large hall, from which a flight of stairs led to the upper floor. At the foot of these Severn paused in doubt. The window could have been overlooked, and his eyes might have deceived him. What would Miss Masters think if he were discovered wandering about the house at midnight? He could vision her scornful disbelief of his story, and was on the point of beating a retreat when a low, harsh voice pulled him up. He could not distinguish the words, but it was a man speaking, and he was upstairs. Noiselessly Severn mounted and halted at the top of the flight, listening to locate the room.

Phil Masters, awakened out of a deep sleep, stared in terrified amazement at the dark, slouch-hatted figure standing by her bedside. Before she could speak the intruder said:

"Keep quiet an' yu won't be hurt."

"Geevor!" she cried, recognising the voice. "What are you doing here? How dare——"

"Shucks, war-talk won't get yu nowhere," the man returned easily. "Tell me where the money is an' I'll go." Then seeing the look of bewilderment on her face, he added, "I mean the two thousand bucks Severn got for the X T herd. He drew it out just before the bank was gutted, though how he got wise beats me."

"I know nothing about it," the girl told him, her courage beginning to assert itself. "If Severn drew it out I suppose he must have it."

"It ain't in his shack, for I've searched, an' he wouldn't tote that amount around with him, so it must be here somewheres," Geevor returned doggedly. Then the menace in his tone deepened. "Come across, girl, or I'll have to give yu a lesson, an' don't forget that yo're a pretty piece o' goods, an' I'll enjoy——"

The threat blanched the girl's cheeks, but she had the pluck of a pioneer's daughter.

"You cowardly cur," she said. "I don't know where the money is, and if I did I would not tell you."

"We'll see about that," he growled.

A sudden dart of the long arms and his fingers, claw-like, gripped her shoulders, tearing the frail fabric of her night attire, and exposing the white flesh beneath; the man's eyes gleamed bestially at the sight.

Frantically she beat him with her fists, but in that iron grip she was almost helpless, and the leering face with its lustful lips came nearer and nearer as he dragged her towards him. His liquor-laden breath told her he had been drinking heavily.

"Bartholomew will hang yu for this," she panted, but the ruffian only laughed.

"Huh! Yu won't tell him; yu'll be damned glad to keep yore mouth shut when I'm finished with you," he sneered.

"I'll tell, if I shoot myself the moment after," the frantic

girl gasped, and with a last despairing effort her nails scored the evil face now so near her own. With an oath of pain and rage he drew back.

"Yu cursed cat!" he snarled. "I'll close yore mouth for good an' all."

The man was mad with passion, beyond all control; his lust was now for blood. His right hand flew to his belt and shot into the air, gripping a knife. The girl's terrified eyes wavered between the gleaming blade and the murderous mask of the ruffian who held it. Another second and it would have been buried in the round white throat, but Severn's gun barked from the doorway, and Geevor, a look of wide surprise on his face, buckled at the knees and fell prone. The girl, half-fainting, gave an inarticulate cry, and sank back upon the bed. Striding into the room, Severn did not pay any attention to her, but seizing the dead man by the ankles, hauled him on to the landing outside. When he returned, Phil had utilised the opportunity he had given her to don a dressing-gown.

"Ain't hurt yu, has he?" he asked, and when she shook her head, "Yu needn't to worry any more. I reckon he was playin' a lone hand, but I'll have the house watched."

On the floor lay the knife, winking wickedly in the faint light. Severn picked it up and went out of the room without waiting for any reply. At the top of the stairs he found Dinah, staring aghast at the corpse. She had heard the shot and come up from her room beside the kitchen.

"Foh de deah Lawd's sake——" she began, but the foreman cut her short.

"Yore mistress has had a shock; go an' stay with her," he said, and slinging the body over his shoulder, carried it out of the house by the way he had come in.

Early on the following morning when he returned from breakfast at the bunkhouse, he found Phil waiting outside his door. She was looking pale and drawn, but her eyes had lost the frostiness hitherto always there when they met.

"I want to thank you for coming to my aid last night," she began.

The foreman flushed and looked uncomfortable. "It don't need speakin' of," he replied, and added something about it being part of his job.

"I cannot understand how you came to be there," she said.

"I caught sight o' someone sneakin' up to the house, an' followed," Severn explained, and then as Quirt came trotting up and thrust a cold nose into the girl's hand, he added, "There's the fella yu gotta thank. If he hadn't roused me——"

"Then I ought to be very glad you—bought him," she said shyly.

The foreman smiled, and there was a warmth and boyishness utterly foreign to his customary rather stern expression when with her.

"We both got reason to be glad, I reckon," he returned whimsically. "This ain't the first good turn he's been guilty of."

He went on to tell of the rattlesnake incident, and the girl's gaze widened in horror as she listened.

"Hideous," she cried. "The man who could conceive such a thing is not fit to live. Did you find out who it was?"

"Yeah," he said, "Mister Ignacio played that prank."

Phil's eyebrows rose, and with a touch of her old manner towards him she said, "Someone told me just lately that he had left the country."

"That's true, but an understatement; as I told yu—he's dead," Severn said.

"But you can't prove it," she protested.

"No," he agreed gravely. "I can't prove it, but it's so."

For a moment there was an awkward silence. The foreman knew her suspicions were returning, and the little oasis of kinder feeling produced by the events of the previous night was being engulfed by a desert of doubt. Deliberately he changed the subject.

"Yu oughtn't to stay alone in that house," he remarked.

"I have Dinah," she said. "And her husband usually sleeps there, though last night he stayed in his kitchen at the bunkhouse."

"I'd let yu have Quirt, but I'm afraid he wouldn't stay put," he smiled.

The girl had seen the look in his eyes when he spoke of the dog, and it prompted her next question.

"I've been told that only a man who is good at heart can win the affection of horses and dogs. Do you believe that?"

"No," Severn told her decidedly. "A hoss won't care for a man who ill-treats him, but a dawg's different; his strong suit is loyalty, an' he lets it override his judgment. I figure dawgs believe in the Divine Right o' Kings; it's the on'y way yu can explain the devotion of an otherwise intelligent animal to an out-an'-out scamp."

The girl smiled at his enthusiasm. "Then Quirt, according to your theory, should have gone back to Martin," she commented.

"It don't apply to pups, an' anyways, Martin warn't his master," he pointed out. "He'd stepped on the dawg's foot in the saloon, an' when it growled at him, he bought it for a dollar just to have the satisfaction o' thrashin' it."

She was about to reply when she saw his face change; the old Severn was back, the mouth hard and cynical, the eyes cold. She followed their gaze. Bartholomew was dismounting in front of the ranch-house.

"Again, thank you—and Quirt," she said, and walked away.

CHAPTER X

AT the sight of Phil apparently in friendly conversation with Severn the Bar B owner's brows knitted into a dark frown. Though he knew the girl doubted and disliked the foreman, the jealousy of age for a younger rival flamed up within him. The smile with which he greeted her was forced, and he could not forbear a sneer.

"Lo, Phil," he said. "Been givin' yore foreman his instructions?"

She detected the taunt and, being a woman, also divined the reason for it, and again because she was a woman, she punished him neatly.

"I've been thanking him," she returned sweetly.

Bartholomew's astonishment was as genuine as his chagrin.

"Whatever for?" he asked.

"Saving my life," she replied soberly, and went on to relate her experience of the night. The effect on her listener was volcanic.

"The dirty skunk died too easy," he gritted, when she had finished. "If I'd 'a' been there I'd 'a' strangled him slow—with my hands—like that," and his outspread fingers closed inch by inch round an imaginary throat.

In that instant of terrible passion she saw a new Bartholomew; the big, genial giant she had always known had gone and in his stead was a dark devil of a man, cold cruelty patent in his eyes. Though she knew it was her own danger that had brought about the revelation, it frightened her.

"Geevor, toa, eh? Well, I never thought much o' him," he went on.

"Was that why you sent him here?" she could not help asking.

"Now, Phil, that ain't fair," he protested. "Yore dad was short-handed an' I did the best I could; the fella knew his work."

"I'm sorry; I shouldn't have said that," she apologised. "You must forgive me, but I'm a little bit shaken this morning."

"An' a good bit grateful, eh?" he queried. "Natural enough, too, but don't yu forget that it wouldn't have suited Mister Severn's schemes to have yu bumped off. Yo're his on'y chance o' grabbin' the Lazy M, an' I'll bet he's feelin' like erectin' a statue to Geevor for givin' him the opportunity o' puttin' yu under an obligation."

The flush on the girl's face told him that the poisoned dart had gone home. She was proud, and the fact that she owed a debt of gratitude to one she held in contempt was a heavy burden. But she was just; a scoundrel Severn might be, but he had saved her life. Even now, though it was all ended, the memory of those awful moments with Geevor chilled her blood. So she had forced herself to the task of thanking her preserver and had come away wondering if she had misjudged him.

Probably the big man divined this, for he set to work to strengthen her suspicions. It was skilfully done, a word, a smile, or a shrug of the shoulders, but they sufficed to put the foreman's conduct in the worst light. But she would not go for a ride, pleading indisposition. Bartholomew, however, rode away quite satisfied with his morning's work.

* * * * *

"The monotony o' life in thisyer far-off an' Gawd-forgotten corner o' the earth is shore eatin' my vitals. If I don't have a whirl at the wheel or a spell o' real poker I'll just naturally fade away."

Thus Larry, on the following evening, when he advised his foreman of his desire to visit town. Severn surveyed the puncher satirically.

"Fade away?—yu?" he smiled. "Why, yo're gettin' "

fatter by the minute, yu hawg. What dam-fool play yu got in that ossified knob yu put yore hat on? Come clean, yu misfit."

As the foreman finished, the applicant ceased scratching the libelled portion of his body, and grinned at him.

"Yu got it, Jim; clean, that's the idea. I wanta buy me a new shirt."

"If yu couldn't work better'n yu can lie yu wouldn't earn half yore pay—not that yu do anyways. I'm lettin' yu go, but unfold them flaps at the side o' yore head an' listen: if yu don't bring back a shirt I'll shore make yu climb a tree."

Larry did not reply to this awful threat, but got his horse and with all speed set out for Hope. But for a man whose errand was the peaceful one of purchasing a garment his preparations were peculiar, for he took his rifle and examined his pistols with particular care, spinning the cylinders to see that they turned smoothly. He had gone but a few miles when he heard a shrill whoop and the drum of galloping hoofs behind him. Wheeling his horse, he waited, gun in hand. It was Linley who emerged from the gloom.

"If yu've come to fetch me back, there's nothin' doin'," Larry greeted him.

"I ain't—I'm aimin' to go with yu; Severn said I could," was the joyful reply. "Told me yu were goin' to buy a shirt an' I was to see yu got a nice quiet pattern."

"Ain't he the motherly soul?" Larry said, and to himself he added, "Cute ol' fox; allus got another way out."

He knew just how the foreman had figured it; Linley was his junior and would act as a brake on any foolhardiness. He said nothing of this, professing himself glad of company. He was even so docile that when they reached the town he proceeded to Callahan's and bought a shirt. The one he selected was a violent pink with green spots.

"What d'ye think of it?" he asked.

"I wouldn't think of it—not for a minute," was the frank comment. "Yu'll look like the colour in yore face had started to run."

"I'll make yu run if yu get pussonal," Larry grinned. "What about this one?"

Larry shuddered visibly. "Reminds me of a paint factory what's been struck by lightnin'," he said. "It's got every colour there is but yaller. Wonder why they left that out?"

"Who's agoin' to wear this blisterin' garment?"

"Yu are, but we gotta look at it an' yu needn't to," his friend retorted.

Eventually they settled upon a blue with darker stripes of the same colour, and then Larry said

"Yu step along to Bent's an' wait for me; I got a bit o' private business.

"But Severn said——" Linley protested.

"Yu was to help me buy a shirt. Well, yu done it," Larry cut in. "He didn't say yu was to ride herd on me allatime, did he?"

Linley had to give in, but it was with some misgiving that he watched his companion swing up the street and enter the "Come Again" saloon. There was nothing to prevent him from following, but he knew it would be regarded as a personal affront, and he liked Larry. As for that young man, he entered the saloon casually, swept a swift glance over the room, and settled himself comfortably at the bar, the tender of which looked his surprise, but pushed forward a bottle and glass without comment.

"Not much doin'," Larry opined, as he helped himself.

"She's early yet—evenin' ain't really started," the bar-keep replied.

"Shore," Larry agreed. "Seen any more o' that chunky chap who got hisself put to sleep?"

"No, he's drifted, I reckon, an' I'm open to bet he's feelin' that jolt right now," said the barman. "He was fair loco when he come round, an' if yore friend had waited——"

"Did I say he was my friend? He's my foreman, that's all," the customer explained coldly.

"Which ain't allus the same thing, eh?" laughed the other.

The conversation was interrupted by the sheriff, who came strutting up, his unlovely countenance still further disfigured by a heavy scowl.

"Yo're the fella that made the trouble in here the other night, huh?" he growled.

"Yu mean the fella that saved trouble, don't yu?" Larry said mildly.

The cowpuncher's quiet demeanour misled the officer and he replied bullily, "Yu horned in on what warn't yore business an' I'm servin' notice——"

"Yo're takin' notice," Larry broke in, and his narrowed eyes had suddenly become bleak and forbidding. "When I see a dirty frame-up like that being put over I make it my business, an' I don't allow any fella to tell me different. That star yo're wearin' means nothin' to me an' I'd as soon drill as take a drink with yu—not as yu've asked me. Yu can tell yore friend Shady——"

"He ain't——" began the sheriff.

"Here? I know it. If he was I'd be speakin' my piece to him—I come a-purpose," the puncher told him. "Let me whisper in yore little pink ear, sheriff; Severn's the fastest man with a gun I ever saw an' he taught me. Yu don't know it but my gun's coverin' yore ab-do-men right now."

Tyler glanced down and his face grew sickly when he saw that the speaker had told the truth; his pistol, concealed from the rest of the room by his body, was pointed full at the sheriff's stomach.

"Yu see," grinned Larry. "I could salivate yu before yu could wink, but I'll give yu an even break, sheriff; I'll cut the cards with yu—for the drinks."

"Yu can go plumb to hell," the officer retorted, and stamped furiously away.

"What yu bin doin' to him?" asked a card-player at a nearby table.

"On'y offered to cut the cards for the drinks," Larry said innocently. "Damn it, a sheriff oughta have pluck enough to risk losin' four bits."

The men who heard the reply exploded into laughter and the badgered officer looked the murder he dared not attempt. The threatened cowboy replied to the look with an understanding smile, and then turned to watch the poker players. He had seen Bartholomew and Penton with their heads together at a table in a far corner, but he was careful to take no notice of them; they appeared to have as little interest in him. He wished he could hear what they were saying, and then he suddenly realised that they were near a window. Slipping out of the saloon he crept cautiously around the building until he reached the angle in which he judged their table was placed. Kneeling beneath the window he could catch something of what they said.

"He's in the plot, Pent," the big man was saying. "Look here, he comes along a few days after Severn takes charge an' gets took on with no questions asked. Then the other night when he covered Shady he calls his foreman by his first name, which ain't usual in a new hand." (Larry swore softly at this.) "I figure he's a bunkie o' Severn's, though Phil says he's harder on him than any o' the rest, but that may be a blind. Here, what d'yu think o' this for an idea?" He dropped his voice and the eavesdropper could hear nothing but a confused mumble. Then came Penton's voice:

"If what yu say is right it oughta work, but I'm all for bumpin' him off; dead men can't kick."

"I want him alive, damn him," Bartholomew hissed. "I'm goin' to get my hands on him an' make him taste hell before I send him there."

"Well, yo're the doc," returned the other. "So he got Geevor, huh?"

"Yes, an' he done a good job in cuttin' that desert rat," Barth said viciously. "He got what was comin' to him."

"He got what's comin' to some more of us if we ain't careful," Penton said. "He's hangin' on that cottonwood at Forby's at this moment o' time, an' the third notch is cut."

"Hell, how should Severn know anythin' 'bout that?" the Bar B owner queried, and then: "I've got it, Pent. Darby turned yaller as I told yu, an' he's put him wise. Severn's playin' these fool pranks to put a scare into us; he'll find out I don't scare easy."

"Mebbe yo're right but I don't like it," his foreman rejoined. "That blasted tree gives me the shivers every time I see it."

"That's easy—keep away from it," said the rancher. "Yu ain't goin' to show the white feather, are yu, Pent?"

"Yu an' me have been knockin' knees on the same trail too long for yu to think that, Bart," the foreman replied. "Three from seven leaves four an' yu can't get away from it. I'm a mite curious to see who's goin' next."

"I'll tell yu; Mister damn Severn, he's next on the slate," Bartholomew laughed. "Now come an' drown yore sorrows, yu old croaker."

Larry heard them get up, and following their example, he returned to Bent's, collected his companion, and set out for the ranch. He rode in silence, thinking over what he had heard. There was a plot to murder Severn and he did not know what it was. He visioned the girl at the Lazy M, and the thought of her married to the man who was scheming to take his friend's life produced an explosive oath which made his mount jump sideways and sent his companion's up into the air also. When the animals had been restored to a proper state of mind, Linley was moved to express himself; this mournful manner of returning from a jaunt to town was not his idea of it.

"She's turned him down—cold—bronc," he confided to his horse. "Reminds me of a play I seen in Kansas City onct. The beeyutiful heroine refuses the villain, who was a shore-enough dirty dog. 'Leave muh,' says she, with flashin' eyes. 'Yu are not fit to touch the hand of an honest woman.' Yessir, an' three husbands had divorced her, but oo' course, that warn't in the play."

Larry jabbed a furtive heel into the ribs of his friend's

mount, whereupon the outraged beast stood straight up on its hind legs, the rider, taken by surprise, kept his seat but lost his hat. By the time he had subdued his pony and recovered his headgear the joker had a good start and was almost home when Linley caught him up again.

"What the hell did yu make that jackass play for?" he demanded hotly.

"I thought yu was goin' to sing," Larry said slyly. "I can't bear to hear yu sing, Gentle; it makes me feel so sorry."

"Sorry?" queried Linley.

"Yes, for the folks what ain't deaf," retorted Larry, promptly steering his horse out of reach and spurring for home.

Linley lost no time in following, and neck and neck they raced to the ranch, where they announced their arrival with shrill Indian whoops and brought the whole outfit from the bunkhouse, guns in hand.

"Shucks, it's on'y them kids back from town," said Big Boy, who, being a year older than either, affected the lordly contempt of age.

"Kid yoreself," Linley retorted. "Larry's bought a shirt, an', by Golly, yu dunno what I've saved yu, not lettin' him have the one he wanted. Honest, fellas, it looked——"

"Had yore suppers?" Severn interposed.

"Well, we had a snack afore we started for home," Larry admitted. "But——"

"All right, go an' wrap yoreself around another couple o' pounds o' grub an' then bring that shirt up to me! I wanta see it."

When Larry stepped into the foreman's hut an hour later he was greeted with a grin.

"So yu didn't find friend Shady?"

"Who told yu——?"

"Why, it didn't need tellin'," smiled the other. "I figured he wouldn't be around so I let yu go; that hombre wants to play nigger in the wood-pile so far as Hope is concerned."

"What was the idea o' sendin' Linley after me?" Larry asked. "D'yu reckon I can't take care o' myself?"

"I was anxious 'bout that shirt—yu got such rotten taste," Severn told him gravely, and then, "If anythin' had busted loose he could 'a' brought me word."

"Well, nothin' did, but somethin's goin' to," the boy rejoined, and related the conversation he had overheard.

The foreman took it quietly. "Larry, I'm shore obliged to yu," he said, and then his eyes crinkled at the corners, "but yu have certainly spoiled my night's sleep. I'm beginnin' to suspect this fella Bart don't like me none at all." He dropped his whimsical tone. "I've been talkin' to the Princess—tellin' her that in these unsettled times she oughtn't to go ridin' without an escort. She r'ared at first but gave in after a while; I told her yore work wouldn't be missed."

Despite his effort to conceal it, the boy's eagerness flamed in his eyes, but none showed in his tone.

"Ridin' herd on a girl ain't my idea of a man's job," was what he said.

"Well, she sorta suggested yu but I dessay Linley——"

"I'll do it—for yu, Jim," Larry hastily interrupted.

"O' course, it won't be every mornin'," the foreman went on. "Bart takes her ridin' quite a lot an' then yu won't be needed."

The flash in the younger man's eyes and the tightening of his lips told the other all he wanted to know, and he chuckled inwardly as he added, in his drawling voice, a final caution:

"Yu better remember that I ain't very favourably regarded by Royalty 'bout now, an' speak accordin'."

CHAPTER XI

THOUGH she had resented the foreman's suggestion, Phil soon discovered that the escort on her rides added to her enjoyment. On the first morning Larry, rifle across his knees, had loped at a decorous distance behind her, until she smilingly told him to sheathe the weapon and ride by her side. The cowboy needed no second invitation. These excursions were the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to him, and his glance, whenever it dared to rest upon her, was full of adoration. The trim figure, poised so buoyantly in the saddle, the proud little head, and the firm but wilful lips had got him, in his own phraseology, "thrown an' tied." And she—well, she liked his merry eyes, his boyishness, and the shyness which she could dissipate with a smile. It was youth calling to youth.

He did not talk much of himself, but by questioning she learned that he had "no folks" and had been "in cattle" since he was big enough to "straddle a hoss." Also that he had "drifted a bit," which, on investigation, turned out to mean that he had travelled and worked over several thousand miles of the country. It amused her to note that when they got down to rest or admire a view he always took his rifle from its scabbard.

"I don't believe there is any danger," she said, when the third ride had passed without incident. "I should be quite safe alone and it is a waste of your time."

"Do you want that I shouldn't come?" he asked, and at the direct question her eyes dropped.

"It is always pleasanter to have company," she fenced, and then, going off at a tangent, "All the trouble and unrest in the district seems to have come with that man Severn; he is a disturbing factor."

Larry wriggled uncomfortably in his saddle. "Stevens——" he began.

"That was before, of course, but——" she paused, and decided not to voice the ungenerous thought. But the boy had guessed it, and had hard work to keep from telling her that to his certain knowledge Severn could have had nothing to do with Stevens' demise. Mindful of the foreman's caution, he had to walk warily, but there were times when loyalty to his friend fought a stern battle with his love for the girl.

They were ambling slowly through a long shallow gully, the floor of which was carpeted with grass and flowers. Far ahead of them, remote and lonely, the giant spires of the Pinnacles pierced the blue of the sky. The girl nodded towards them.

"I have always wanted to explore those peaks," she said. "They look fierce and forbidding, but the view must be wonderful."

"I reckon the climb up would just naturally ruin the view," her companion replied.

"Oh, Larry," she laughed. "Then you don't agree that having to struggle hard for something makes it more valuable."

The cowboy was nonplussed for a moment and then he grinned engagingly.

"'Pends what it is," he replied. "As for views, I can get one right here that I wouldn't swap for any in the world."

The warmth in his tone and gaze sent the hot blood to her cheeks and she was conscious of a thrill of pleasure. She was considering how best to put this daring young man in his place when he leaned forward and grabbed the bridle of her horse. Instantly she saw why. Round a curve in the gully, less than a mile away, six horsemen had trotted. They had white blotches where their faces should have been, and at the sight of the girl and her companion they quickened their pace.

"The White Masks," Phil gasped.

"Looks like," Larry agreed. "Mebbe they don't want us, but I ain't takin' chances. We gotta punch the breeze."

Whirling their horses, they headed for the ranch at full speed. A savage whoop came from behind and, turning, Larry saw that the unknown riders were spurring hard in pursuit. For a while the fugitives held their own, and then it became evident that the pursuers were gaining, slowly but surely.

"We'll never make it—they got better hosses," the cowboy concluded, but he kept it to himself.

Side by side they raced on, the wiry little cow-ponies at full stretch, willing to run till they dropped; the girl rode magnificently, as though part of the animal beneath her and coaxing every foot of speed out of it. The first mile had brought them back to the open prairie and they made good time, but then they had to cross a strip of broken country. Along ravines, over rock-ribbed ridges where a single false step would spell disaster, through thickets of spruce and jack-pine, bending to avoid the outflung branches, they flashed, until they again emerged into a small grass-covered valley. Larry looked back and stifled a curse when he saw that the pursuers had gained. Then a bullet whined past and they heard the crash of the report.

"The cowardly coyotes," he muttered through his clenched teeth. "They shan't have her."

He had no doubt it was the girl they wanted. Another shot came, his horse stumbled, and the cowboy jumped clear just as the animal pitched headlong, quivered and lay still. The girl pulled up with a cry of dismay.

"Go ahead—ride for the ranch," he cried. "I can hold 'em for a piece."

"But they'll get you, Larry," she protested. "Jump up behind me."

"We couldn't make it ridin' double; they don't want me—it's yu they're after," he urged. "Ride like hell for the boys. Tell Severn I did my best."

"I'll remember, Larry—I'll always remember," she said softly, and he saw that her eyes were misted.

Without another word she raced off and the cowboy dragged his rifle from under the saddle and stretched himself behind the dead horse. The bandits had halted and were bunched together about six hundred yards away, but a bullet from Larry which dropped a horse sent them out on a half circle. A couple of shots came in reply but they went wide. To his surprise the men made no effort to follow the fleeing girl. Certainly the two on the extreme right and left began a detour, but they rode slowly and presently vanished. The others remained, standing near the horses, and well out of range.

"Goin' to sneak up on me from the back," Larry surmised. He looked and saw that there was a ridge behind him which would make the manoeuvre a simple one. "Wish I had a hoss."

But it was no use wishing, so he rolled a cigarette, lighted it and lay smoking, waiting philosophically for the next move in the game. Half an hour passed and then from the ridge behind came a gruff command:

"Drop that gun, shuck off yore belt, an' elevate yore paws; two of us has got yu covered."

Larry stood up, leaving his rifle on the ground, unbuckled his belt and let it fall, but instead of putting up his hands he used them to make another smoke.

"Come ahead," he said coolly.

Two masked men rose up from the brow of the ridge and stalked down upon him, rifles ready for the least movement.

"I told yu to put yore hands up," growled the one who had spoken before.

"I forgot, an' I'm keepin' on forgettin'," laughed the prisoner. "What yu goin' to do about it?"

The man snarled out an oath, scooped up the rifle and belt, and sent his companion for their horses. At the same moment the other four came galloping up, two of them using the same mount. One, who appeared to be the leader, jumped down

and, producing a piece of paper from his pocket, fixed it in a cleft stick and jammed it into the ground. Larry watched this proceeding amazedly.

"If yo're erectin' a epytaph to the hoss his name's 'Bouncer,'" he volunteered.

"I ain't, an' yu keep yore trap shut or I'll blow yu apart," was the surly answer.

Larry laughed at him. "Yu dasn't, old-timer, yu gotta deliver me in good shape," he guessed.

"Yu seem to know a lot about it," the fellow sneered.

"Why, it's as plain as yore face must be, seein' how careful yu are to hide it," the boy retorted.

"Tie him on a hoss—two o' yu'll have to ride double," was the only response.

So Larry, astride one of the bandit horses, his legs roped beneath its belly, found himself heading for the Pinnacles, ignorant of the fate in store for him. But he was not unduly downcast; Phil's last words, and the fact that she was safe, were a sufficient compensation.

* * * * *

The arrival of the girl at the ranch, riding a spent and lathered pony, brought the foreman and those of the outfit there running. In a few words she told what had happened. Severn wasted no time.

"Hosses an' guns," he ordered.

"One for me, Darby," Phil added.

The foreman looked at her. "I doubt if yo're fit——" he began.

"I'm going, she told him. "It was for me——" She broke off and turned away.

Severn made no further objection, and in a few moments he, six men and the girl set out for the scene of the attack. They rode in grim silence, the only sound the jingle of spur or bit and the creak of saddle leather. Not until Phil warned them they were nearing the spot did they slacken pace. Pre-

sently Severn called a halt, just short of a ridge the girl remembered crossing directly she left the cowboy.

"Stay here, boys," he said. "They may be waitin' for us, an' there's no sense in our buttin' into an ambush."

He rode forward alone, topped the rise, and vanished.

"Black Bart would 'a' sent one of us to do that," the girl heard Darby say, and the other men laughed assent.

Somehow she felt that it was true, and a spasm of respect for the man who took the risk himself when he need not shot through her. Then came another thought, bred of Bartholomew's poisoned suggestions: was there any risk to Severn, or was he only playing a part? Her speculations were cut short by the return of the foreman.

"The hoss is there—what the buzzards have left of it—saddle an' bridle gone, an' no sign of Larry barrin' this paper," he said. "Here's what she says:

'We got yore man, Severn. If yu want him, be at Skull Canyon to-morrow about noon, an' fetch along two thousand dollars. If yu ain't there, or try any tricks, he stretches rope.—THE MASK.'

A cry from Phil, and a chorus of muttered curses from the men greeted the epistle, which was scrawled in pencil on a page apparently torn from an account book, for it was ruled for figures and numbered. The writing, Severn noted, appeared to be the same as on the scrap he had taken from Ignacio's body. Moodily he gave the word to return, and the girl whirled upon him.

"Aren't you going to do anything?" she asked. "Surely you're not leaving him to die?"

"There is nothin' we can do now," Severn told her. "They'll have covered their tracks, an' s'pose we could trail 'em, we'd on'y run into an ambush; they ain't overlookin' that bet."

She stared at him, storm in her eyes.

"I call it cowardly," she said. "If you won't lead the men, I will."

Severn did not reply and, looking at the others, she knew that they would not follow her. It was Darby who answered.

"The foreman's right, Miss Phil," he said. "No good buttin' yore head agin a rock. S'pose we did find 'em, an' it ain't likely in that pile o' up-ended country, they might hang Larry *pronto*. They got us out on a limb, shore enough."

With a glance of contempt which made the men squirm in their saddles, the angry girl swung her horse round on the home trail. She rode in silent disdain, trying to reconcile the smiling face of the boy who had squired her so joyously in the morning with the grim-faced *man* who had so roughly told her to "ride like hell for the boys," and who had cheerfully sacrificed, perhaps his life, for her sake.

When, after a troubled night, she came down on the following morning, she found the foreman waiting to see her. Handing her a roll of bills, he said:

"That's the money for the herd, less what I've paid for expenses; yu had better put it in a safe place."

"Why are you giving it to me?" she asked.

"Yu are forgettin' that I've got an engagement," he pointed out.

"You are going to Skull Canyon?" she cried. "But then you will want the money."

"Of course I'm goin', but I'm not takin' any cash," he said. "I ain't a kid."

"But what do you intend to do?"

"I dunno; I'll have to see what cards I get before I can play 'em."

His tone was light, and there was even a quirk of amusement in the corners of his eyes. Yet he was taking a desperate chance. But was he? Despite her better feelings the old suspicion recurred.

"Perhaps it isn't so dangerous after all," she said coldly.

"You may have friends there."

She saw his eyes flash. "I've one friend there an' that's why I'm goin'," he said sternly.

"I didn't know Larry was a friend," she answered lamely.

"I call any man in my outfit that until I know different," he told her. "If I don't make it back, go to Judge Embley."

"Mr. Bartholomew will help me," she retorted.

"He's more likely to help himself," Severn said sardonically.

"You have no right to say that," she replied sharply. "I know you don't like him but——"

For a single instant the man lost his iron control and she quailed before the savage anger in his eyes.

"Listen to me, girl," he said. "God Almighty placed a pretty head on yore shoulders an' it seems impossible that He shouldn't have put some brains in it. Use them."

Without another word he strode from the room, sprang into the saddle of his waiting horse, and rode off. The girl, aghast at the sudden spate of passion she had aroused, saw him wave a farewell to the watching outfit and vanish. Then she dropped into the nearest chair and stared with hard, unseeing eyes, at the wall. She had encountered a novel experience and she did not like it. Men in anger she had often seen enough, but never had that anger been directed at her. Of course he was a brute, and he hated Bartholomew, but—was he right? She knew that the owner of the Bar B was more feared than liked in the district, but she had always put that down to his success. He was hard, but in that rough and lawless country a man had to be, to hold his own. Despite their apparent friendship, her father had not trusted him. Little demons of doubt pursued her all day; she found herself watching the northern trail anxiously, and knew she was looking for Larry.

CHAPTER XII

By the time he had covered a mile Severn had recovered his customary calm, and was taking himself to task for having lost it.

"An' it won't do no good, fella," he confided to his mount. "The Princess has been buttered up all her life, an' it'll need a bigger shock than that to jar her back into the nice, sensible girl she oughta be."

He had told the truth when he admitted that he did not know how the rescue of the prisoner was to be effected; he had made no plans. He figured that the bandits did not want Larry, and the fact that he had been named as the bringer of the ransom made him pretty certain that he was the one they wished to lay hands on; it was a trap and the cowboy was the bait. He smiled grimly; he was willing to be caught.

"What with the girl, Bart, an' these fly-by-nights, I'm 'bout as welcome as a wet dawg in this neck o' the woods," he soliloquised. "Well, I've shore been unpopular before," he added, with a grin as he thought of the time when certain towns were enthusiastically offering thousands of dollars for his arrest.

It was nearing noon when he reached the entrance to Skull Canyon, pulled up and sat waiting, a smile of contempt on his lips. He would not have been surprised to see a spurt of flame from the brush and to feel hot lead tearing through his body, but instead, a hidden voice hailed him.

"Drop yore belt an' rifle an' put up yore hands, Severn; we got yu dead to rights."

The foreman obeyed the order, and a masked man, leading his horse, emerged from a clump of undergrowth twenty yards away. Picking up the discarded weapons he climbed into his saddle and said gruffly:

"Foller my tracks, an' if you feel like makin' a break, just remember there's a coupla chaps behind yu with orders to shoot."

"I didn't come here to play the fool," Severn said acidly. "Where yu takin' me?"

"Wait an' see," was the laconic answer.

"The wisdom o' the ages in three words," commented the captive lightly.

The guide only grunted and led the way through a thicket of spruce and aspen to the right of the canyon, after which they plunged into some of the wildest country Severn had ever seen. Rocky ridges, steep slopes down which the horses had to slide on their haunches, gullies strewn with stones, detritus wrested by the weather from their walls, masses of dense, thorny undergrowth, succeeded each other in bewildering confusion. The trail, a mere pathway, had been little used, and the prisoner guessed that this was not the direct route to the robbers' roost.

Throughout the journey they had been gradually climbing, and presently they reached the lower slopes of the mountains and rode amidst the serried ranks of a pine forest. The air was cooler, for the sunlight only penetrated the thick foliage overhead in shafts; on the soft carpet of pine needles the hoofs of the horses made no sound. Glancing back, Severn saw two masked riders, rifles in readiness across their knees. Evidently they had closed up, for although he had heard, this was the first time he had caught sight of them. Gradually the trees grew scantier and more stunted until presently they left the pine-belt behind and headed along the side of the mountain. Above them loomed one of the giant teeth of the Pinnacles, towering in solemn majesty. A long, slight descent brought them to the edge of a cup-like depression in the side of the range. It was perhaps a mile in length and half as wide, and the whole expanse, save the rock-rimmed, brush-cluttered walls, was covered with luxuriant grass. In the centre was a small lake, fed by numerous streamlets from the heights above. Cattle and horses were dotted about, grazing.

At first sight there appeared to be no entrance to the valley, but the guide did not hesitate. Sliding his horse down a sharp incline, he circled some bushes, and came to where a break in the rock formation afforded a natural gateway. Passing through this they came to a rude corral.

"Turn yore hoss in there, we gotta walk some," the captor commanded, setting the example himself.

Severn complied, and then followed the other up a narrow, stony path which climbed up and along the steep face of the mountain. At a height of about a hundred feet above the floor of the valley the path broadened out into a ledge, and here were several openings in the rock face. Severn knew it for an old Hopi Indian haunt, and smiled sarcastically at the thought that the present inhabitants were probably considerably more savage than the first of the cave-dwellers. Several of the caves had rude doors fitted, and into one of these the prisoner was directed.

"Stay there till yo're wanted," his captor said. "Hungry?"

"Well, breakfast shore seems a long time back," the Lazy M man replied, and then, fishing out a five-dollar bill, "D'yu reckon yu could find a bottle o' whiskey? I'm feelin' sorta shaky."

"Dutch courage, eh?" chuckled the other. "See what I can do."

He went away, padlocking the door first, and presently returned with meat, bread and a flask of spirit.

"Go light on that hooch," he warned. "It's wuss'n dynamite if yu ain't used to it."

Severn nodded; he knew the stuff; crude spirit, illicitly distilled, a draught of liquid fire which would take the skin off an unaccustomed throat and send the unwary drinker mad. He had no intention of imbibing it. When the man had gone he examined his place of confinement. It was a mere hole in the rock, entirely dependent for light and air upon the filtrations through the ill-fitting door. He made his meal, took a mouthful of spirit and spat it out, poured

two-thirds of the remainder on the ground and placed the bottle beside him.

Squatting with his back against the wall and a cigarette between his lips he calmly awaited the next development. That he had been brought there with his eyes unbandaged and his hands at liberty was an ominous sign; they were sure of him and did not mean that he should leave the place alive. He wondered where Larry was. His first task was to find him.

Two hours passed and then a step outside sent his head slumping down, hat pushed back, figure sprawled as though in a drunken stupor. The man who had brought him swore when he looked at the bottle.

"Yu damn fool—I told yu to be careful," he said.

"I'm aw ri'," Severn mumbled. "Whadye wan'?"

Helped by the bandit, he got to his feet. Still gripping his arm, his conductor led him, not without difficulty, to a larger cave with a high, domed roof. Numerous other caves apparently opened upon this, and into one of these near the entrance he was thrust. It was a biggish place, lighted by a hole in the rock face, and in it seven men were lolling in rough chairs; all were masked, only their eyes showing through slits in the dirty white kerchiefs.

"Why for didn't yu tie him up?" asked one, whose figure seemed somehow familiar to Severn.

"Huh! Look at him—he's tied hisself up," replied the other.

"Hittin' the bottle, eh?" sneered the first speaker, who was evidently in some authority; and then to the prisoner, "Where's the dollars?"

Severn drew himself up in drunken dignity and nearly lost his balance.

"Shay, fella, whadye take me for, thinkin' I'd fall for that?" he asked. "I ain't no ch-child."

"If yu ain't brought 'em I'll hang the pair o' yu," snarled the unknown.

Severn leered at him and shook his head. "Nothin' to that, ol'-timer," he said thickly. "Whatsa good o' two

corpsed cowpunchers? Can't even sell the hides an' t-taller. Listen to m-me. How do I know yu got my m-man? Might be somebêdy else's fella yu grabbed, see? Yu prove he's m-mine an' I'll write to the r-ranch for the money. One o' yore c-chaps can go for it. What's fairer'n that, huh?"

"Fetch the other fool in," commanded the leader, disgustedly surveying the smiling, rocking figure before him.

In two minutes Larry, his hands tied behind him, came in and stared in amazement when he saw his foreman peering at him with heavy, blinking eyes.

"'S' Larry, shore enough, but why's there two of him?" Severn muttered bemusedly. "Mus' be twinsh. Betcha they come from the same family, anyways. Yessir——" he drew himself up and looked at his audience with owlsh gravity. "I never knew a case o' twinsh with different parents."

Laughter came from behind the masks; the bandits were enjoying the spectacle and their vigilance was relaxing. This was what the foreman was playing for. He noted that the man who had brought him in was just behind. His face took on an expression of maudlin concern.

"Twinsh is dangerous to c-community—can't tell t'other from which," he stated seriously. "Gotta 'bolish one of 'em." His hands dropped to his holsters and a look of astonishment came on his face at finding them empty. "Losht my guns," he mumbled. "'S' funny."

A roar of raucous merriment greeted the announcement, and they saw him suddenly stagger backwards and throw his hands wide in an effort to keep on his feet. In another second he leapt sideways so that every man in the room was in front of him, and the guns he had snatched from the unwary man behind him were threatening them.

"Reach for the roof, every dam' one o' yu," he ordered. "The last one ap gets a pill. As I was sayin'; twins is dangerous, an' these guns is twins."

The drunken cowpuncher with the slurring, tripping tongue had disappeared and, in his stead, was a crouching,

alert gunman, with narrowed eyes, a savagely snarling mouth, and death in either hand. It was one man against eight, and all of them had courage of a kind; by a concerted effort they could overwhelm him, but at least one would die swiftly and none of them wanted to be that one. So the command was obeyed, but none too quickly in one case, and the culprit screamed an oath as a bullet tore away the lobe of an ear.

"When I tell a fella to do anythin' he's gotta hustle," commented the marksman. "Stand up in a line facing the wall an' keep yore paws up, 'less yo're tired o' life."

When this had been done, as it was in quick time, Severn holstered one of his guns, stepped forward and borrowed a knife from the belt of one of the bandits in order to free his friend. As he did so, a man further along the line took a chance and jerked his head round to see what was happening. Instantly a bullet perforated his hat.

"If this gun didn't throw a mite high, yu'd be havin' yore wings fitted right now," Severn said grimly; and then, the knife having done its work, he added, "Pull their teeth, get one o' them ropes, an' tie their hands behind 'em."

With a joyous yelp, Larry came to life and leaped to obey. The guns he flung into the middle of the floor, and cutting a lariat into suitable lengths proceeded to bind the wrists of the captives with an enthusiasm which drew hearty curses from his victims. This done, Severn searched for and found his own revolvers, but had to content himself with another rifle. Then he stepped up to the bandit who had done the talking and jerked the masking handkerchief from his face.

"Just as I reckoned," he said. "Yore figure is a trifle uncommon, Mister Shadwell. Step ahead, we're takin' yu with us."

"Damn yu, I'll get yu both for this," the man hissed.

"Mebbe, but for now, we've got yu," Severn told him.

"March, you mealy-mouthed son of a she-dawg, or I won't leave enough o' yu to bury."

Under the urge of a gun-barrel in his ribs, the ruffian slouched out and down the mountain pathway, his captors,

having first pitched all the weapons collected into the valley, followed him. At the corral, Severn took his own mount, Larry picked the best he could to replace the one he had lost, and Shadwell was mounted on a third, his hands released and his feet tied to the stirrups. Then the foreman threw the loop of his rope round the prisoner's neck and secured the other end to his saddle-horn.

"If yu like to bolt for it an' save the hangman a job, I ain't objectin'," he remarked pleasantly.

The only reply was a venomous scowl which left the recipient untouched; he had encountered hard looks before. He merely told the fellow to go ahead and take the nearest trail for Hope.

"An' don't yu delay none, for if we get tired o' yore company there's trees a-plenty," he warned him.

"Yu old son of a gun," Larry said, as they rode behind the prisoner. "Couldn't yu get any o' the boys to come with yu, or did yu wanta hog all the glory?"

Severn explained the reason for his solitary effort.

"Boun' to do somethin'—the Princess was right peeved with me," he added, and chuckled when he saw the boy's face promptly justify his nickname.

"I reckon she ain't got too good an opinion o' me—I spoke rough when I said for her to ride to the ranch," Larry confessed.

Severn laughed aloud. "So did I when I told her to use her brains," he grinned.

"My Gawd, Jim, yu never did," Larry ejaculated, awe and admiration in his tone. "Where did the lightnin' strike yu?"

"I didn't wait—lit a shuck, *pronto*," the foreman admitted.

"How come yu to hit on that actin' drunk dodge? Yu must 'a' had a lot o' practice to do it so good."

"Been noticin' my friends," Severn countered, and then, "Yu see, I didn't wanta be tied an' I had to get 'em off their guard; it was a long shoe, but I made it."

"Yu shore did. What we goin' to do with this jigger?"

He nodded towards the outlaw, riding chin down, hunched in his saddle, ahead of them.

"Hand him over to the sheriff."

"Tyler'll on'y let him go."

"Yu bet he will, an' that'll put him in wrong with more'n half the folks in Hope. The sheriff ain't goin' to be a bit grateful, believe me."

Either on account of Severn's warning, or for some reason of his own, Shadwell appeared to be as eager to reach town as his captors, and under his guidance they made such good time that they arrived before nightfall. Their appearance filled the street, and an eager crowd followed them to the shack which served the double purpose of lock-up and sheriff's quarters. Tyler was at home, and his eyes nearly popped out of his head when he saw who the prisoner was.

"What's the big idea?" he asked.

In a few brief sentences Severn told of the capture and rescue of Larry and of the taking of Shadwell who, sitting erect now, listened with a scowling face. At the conclusion of the story he broke into a torrent of protest.

"It's a lot o' damn lies. I dunno nothin' about a girl, an' the on'y time I seen these fellas afore was when one of 'em held me up an' the other slugged me in the saloon yonder. I was ridin' the Desert Edge trail 's'afternoon when these two jumped me an' fetched me here."

"An' this ain't your'n, o' course," Severn said, fishing the dirty white mask from his pocket.

"Never seed it," the prisoner lied stolidly. He turned to Tyler. "Yo're the sheriff, I believe; these jaspers yore deppities?"

"They ain't," replied that worthy emphatically.

There was a stir as the crowd opened to let Bartholomew through. The big man looked at the outlaw, and there was not a trace of recognition in his glance.

"So that's yore bandit chief, is it?" he said. "Well, he's ugly enough." Some of the crowd laughed, and Severn,

who was watching Shadwell, saw an angry gleam come into his eyes. "Ain't he the fella that was in the ruckus at the 'Come Again'? What's the yarn?" Bartholomew went on.

The sheriff repeated what Severn had told him, and the Bar B rancher turned to the foreman. "Yu got that notice they served?"

Bart glanced over it, and at his suggestion the prisoner was taken into the sheriff's office, given paper and pencil, and made to write down the words of the notice, which Bart read out to him. A comparison of the two plainly showed they were written by different hands.

"That don't help us," the big man said, and put the papers in his pocket.

Instantly Severn stepped forward. "That notice belongs to me, an' I'll trouble yu for it," he said.

"Rightly, it's evidence, an' the sheriff takes charge of it," was the reply.

"When he wants it I'll be on hand," the foreman retorted, and there was a threat in his tone. "Pass it over."

For an instant Bartholomew hesitated, his face dark with passion, and then he flung the paper on the table.

"Yu keep a-pilin' up the score, Severn," he rasped.

"There's gotta be a settlin' some time."

Severn picked up the document, looked to make sure it was the original, and laughed as he thrust it back into the pocket of his vest.

"Shore, an' in full," he said, and turning to the sheriff he added, "If yu got pluck enough to smoke out these coyotes, gather yore posse an' I'll guide yu to their hang-out."

"When I want yore help I'll ask for it," the officer blustered. "As for this fella——" He looked at the Bar B owner.

"Yu better take charge of him," Bart said. "I'll be seein' Miss Masters in the mornin', an' we'll know how much o' this kidnapped cowboy yarn is true. I ain't takin' the word o' any man from the Lazy M."

"Not since the men yu put there to spy left the country,"

Severn came back at him, and had the satisfaction of seeing the other give a little start of surprise. He did not reply, however, and Severn went in search of his horse, satisfied with having put the sheriff in an embarrassing position.

* * * * *

A burst of cheering from the bunkhouse brought Phil to the verandah, and she witnessed the triumphal entry of the foreman and the man he had gone to fetch. Her first impulse was to run down and welcome them, but a thought which brought a blush to her cheek restrained her. Intermittent merriment from within the bunkhouse whetted her curiosity, but she had to wait for the appearance of Jonah before it was satisfied. And then, when the grinning darkie had told the story, she did not know what to think. Was it possible that this one man had gone into a nest of desperadoes, outwitted them, and brought away not only the captive but the chief of the captors? It seemed incredible, and yet, knowing the man himself, cold, confident, quick-thinking, she realised that it was not. That he now had the outfit with him to a man she knew; had he plotted the whole episode with just that end in view? She gave it up in despair.

It was a curiously shy but smiling girl who responded to Larry's hail next morning, when that young man came to know if she wished to "go a-ridin'." After she had told him how glad she was to see him safely back again, she said:

"I don't feel like a ride to-day, Larry."

The boy's face fell; he had wanted to tell his tale.

"We could go south," he suggested.

She shook her head. "No, I've a visitor coming," she smiled.

Larry knew who it was, and smothered a curse. "Well, soon then," he pleaded, and his heart was in his eyes.

She nodded consent, and as he turned away, Bartholomew cantered up. His bold gaze followed the retreating cowboy from under bent brows.

"Mornin', Phil, what's that pup want?" was his greeting, as he swung from the saddle.

The girl's forehead creased in a little frown; she did not like his tone or the epithet, and her mental comparison of the clean-limbed, smiling youth with the hard-bitten, aggressive older man was not to the latter's advantage.

"He came to ask if I intended to ride this morning; nowadays I have to have an escort—the country is not safe, even for a girl," she said rather pointedly, and went on to tell of her encounter with the White Masks. "So you see," she concluded, "adventures are 'comin' in bunches,' as Larry would say."

The man's frown deepened at her familiar reference to the cowboy; here was a possibility he had not figured on.

"So that part o' the tale was true then," he remarked. "But it's plain them fellas wasn't after yu, Phil."

"The bullet that killed Larry's horse might have hit me," the girl pointed out.

"That's so, they took a fool chance there, but I reckon the whole play goes to prove that Severn is in cahoots with this White Mask gang. Look at the facts. He claims to have been held up in Skull Canyon, an' he gets away with the dollars; he draws his money outa the bank just in time, an' now he goes up there single-handed, razzle-dazzles eight armed men, an' fetches away the prisoner an' one o' the bandits."

"But why?"

"It makes him solid with yore outfit an' it gets him a reputation in Hope. Yu can gamble it's a grand-stand play an' part of his scheme to get hold o' this ranch."

"But the White Masks wouldn't stand for his handing-over one of them to the law," she protested.

Bartholomew laughed sarcastically. "Nothin' to that," he said. "This mornin' Tyler was found neatly trussed up an' gagged. When they loosed him he said three fellas in white masks come in the night, tied him up, took his keys an' vanished with the prisoner. He's a slick worker, is Mister

Severn, but I'm keepin' tabs on him, an' I'll get him yet."

The news that the captive had been released gave the affair a new aspect, and the fact that Bartholomew had advanced the same explanation of Severn's success as she herself, impressed her; it is only human to accept corroboration of one's own theory. Any gratitude she had felt towards the foreman for his rescue of Larry was now heavily discounted.

The Bar B owner, seeing that his arguments had produced some effect, let the matter drop. But his change of subject was not a happy one.

"By the way, Phil, I don't like yore cavortin' round the country with a common puncher," he remarked.

The girl's eyes widened and there was a flash of anger in them as she replied, "I shall do as I please. You have no right to criticise or dictate to me."

"I reckon I have," he said. "We're goin' to be married, yu know."

"I don't know, and at present, anyway, I have no wish to," she retorted.

Although, realising he had tried the wrong tactics, he did his best to make peace, she refused to go riding with him, and Bartholomew left in a savage temper. He had learned how Larry came to be at the Lazy M, and whether he was an accomplice or not of Severn, he was a disturbing factor, and must be dealt with.

The trail to the Bar B took a north-westerly line straight across the open range and then dipped down into a pocket of broken country for some miles, winding through miniature forests, rock and brush-strewn ravines, and tiny canyons, the walls of which scarcely rose above the level of the surrounding plains. It was known as The Sink. Passing the mouth of one of these canyons, Bart suddenly noticed the tracks of a horse leading into it, and back again. They were not fresh, and in that sheltered spot might even have been made months before. His curiosity aroused, he followed them, forcing

his way through the foliage which overhung the sandy bottom.

At the end of about two hundred yards, the tracks led to a thick bush growing close to the face of the canyon wall, and the rancher was about to turn away with an oath of disgust for his wasted time when he caught a gleam of something through the leaves. Dismounting and pulling the bush aside, he uncovered a fissure in the rock, and saw that it contained clothing. There was a vest—a shiny button of which had attracted his notice—pants, a shirt, and a sombrero. One by one he drew the garments out and examined them. In the sweat-band of the hat he found the letters P. M. in ink, and in the pocket of the vest was an empty envelope addressed to Philip Masters, at the Lazy M ranch.

The discovery drew a whistle of amazement from the finder. How came the clothes of the missing ranchman, which he recognised as being the last he had seen him wearing, in such an out-of-the-way spot? Where was the body? For he had no doubt now that the owner of the clothes no longer lived. Painstakingly, foot by foot, he searched the whole of the little canyon, but found nothing more.

"On'y been one fella in here before me," Bart muttered, as he carefully studied the prints in the sand.

Sizing things up, he came to the conclusion that the murderer must have buried the stripped body elsewhere, or left it to the natural scavengers of the plains, the coyotes and vultures. Then he had hidden the tell-tale clothing in the cleft, where only one chance in a thousand would lead to its discovery. Replacing the articles as he had found them, he rode on his way deep in thought, and presently a grin of malicious triumph twisted his lips.

"Couldn't be better. I'm reckonin' I can use yu just as well dead, Mister Masters," he sneered.

That night he and Penton were closeted long together, and when they parted, even the bitter face of the Bar B foreman wore the semblance of a smile. But it was not a good one to see.

CHAPTER XIII

It was two days before Phil redeemed her promise to go riding again with Larry, and in that time he had scarcely seen her. In truth she had avoided him, an unaccountable shyness making her fight the growing desire to see him of which she was conscious. So that it was a new Phil, demure, tremulous, and utterly sweet, who loped beside the young cowboy towards the southern region of the range. She listened eagerly to his account of what had happened to him after she left on her wild dash to the ranch, but his praise of the foreman left her unmoved.

"Some folks fancy he has friends among the White Masks," she ventured.

Larry straightway forgot himself—and her. "Hell!" he cried. "Yu tell me the names o' the skunks an' I'll shore make them hop for the horizon."

Not wishing to attempt any long-distance leaping, she looked shocked instead, and the boy at once wilted into a state of confused contrition, evidenced by his reddened cheeks and stammering apology.

"I didn't know he was such a friend of yours," she remarked.

"He ain't," Larry lied. "But I shorely gotta be grateful; he took a big chance for me."

"It doesn't seem possible that one man could overawe so many," she speculated.

"He had the drop on 'em," the puncher pointed out. "They could 'a' rushed him, but he'd 'a' got some first, an' none o' them fellas was pinin' to learn the hawp."

"What do you think of Mr. Bartholomew?" she asked.

Larry was not to be caught. "I dunno much about him," he returned. "But I wouldn't ride for the Bar B."

He could have said nothing more damaging; a torrent of abuse would have been far less effective. The girl was silent for a time; she had been discovering of late that it was difficult to find anyone who had a good word for the local autocrat. True, the criticism was usually of a cautious character, but always it condemned.

"So you don't think that Severn is an outlaw?" she queried presently.

Larry shook with internal mirth. "I ain't sayin' that, but I'll gamble against him bein' linked up with that gang in the Pinnacles," he replied. "O' course, yu can see by the look of him he's had a hectic past, an' he may have been an outlaw sometime. He don't seem to have no high opinion o' sheriffs, judgin' by what he told the specimen they got in Hope."

They were pacing along a narrow winding draw, the rocky sides of which were splashed with patches of dwarfed shrubs and cactus. In places the spreading branches of larger trees met over their heads and filtered the afternoon sunshine, throwing shifting shadows as the light breeze swayed the foliage.

"Oh, what a beauty," the girl cried, suddenly reining in.

Her companion followed the direction of her pointing finger, and saw up on the rock face, a magnificent bloom of the *ocatilla*. Before she realised it, he had slipped from his saddle and was climbing the side of the draw. Phil also got down and seated herself on a fallen tree-trunk. In a few moments he was back again, and the blood-red blossom was in her hands. —He was in the act of presenting it when a rider trotted round a jutting rib of rock which formed one of the bends in the draw; it was Devint. For an instant he pulled on his reins, and then recognising them, came on, a grin of derision on his lips as he noted their flushed faces. His hat came off in an ironically elaborate sweep as he passed.

"Shore am sorry to have butt'd in," he said, and there was that in his tone which made the remark an insult.

Receiving no reply, he loped slowly on, and with a mocking wave of the hand vanished round a further curve. Phil, stealing an embarrassed glance at her companion, saw that he was staring after the intruder, his eyes bleak and his jaws clamped together.

"Who's that fella?" he asked, almost roughly.

"Devint," she replied. "I wish he hadn't seen us; he's sore at the Lazy M because the foreman fired him, and he'll—talk."

"Huh! We better be gettin' back," Larry said.

The ride home was made almost in silence. Into the minds of both the leering countenance of Devint intruded insistently, and the girl's cheeks burned at the thought that the dismissed man's slanderous tongue, innocent as the incident had been, might make her the gossip of the saloons. But Bartholomew would not permit that, she told herself; Devint was working for him again, and he would close his mouth, unless—and here was another disturbing thought—Bartholomew would be jealous, furiously so, and that would mean danger to her companion; at that possibility her heart missed a beat.

The cowboy was forcing the pace, as though in a hurry to get home. He spoke seldom, and all the gaiety had gone from his face, to be replaced by a grim intentness. The girl tried to rouse him.

"You look as if you were going to kill someone," she bantered.

His head came round with a jerk, and she saw his cheeks redden. Then he laughed.

"I am," he said. "I'm agoin' to just naturally slay • Jonah if he ain't got a good meal ready."

Phil said no more; the jocular reply had only served to deepen her doubts; she felt uneasy, frightened. When they arrived at the ranch, Larry took the ponies to the corral straight away, which was unusual, and, presently she saw him, mounted on a fresh horse, shoot out on the trail for town; he had not waited to feed. Her feeling of unrest

pursued her, and when Severn returned with the outfit, she called him aside and related the incident of the afternoon.

"Larry looked as if he recognised Devint, and—hated him, yet he asked me who he was," she said. "Of course, the man was insolent, but I somehow feel it wasn't only that."

"Damnation," swore the foreman, and forgot to apologise. "I reckon yo're right, Miss Masters. For some reason or other, he's gone to find that scallywag. Devint's yellow, an' a bad actor, but he's reckoned fast with a gun."

"Oh, hurry, perhaps you'll be in time to prevent their meeting," she urged.

"If I ain't, an' anythin's happened to Larry, Mister Devint won't see another sunrise," was Severn's sinister promise.

Striding down to the corral, he caught and saddled a horse and set out for the town at full speed. He had no hope of catching Barton, but there was a chance that the two men had not yet met.

* * * * *

The "Come Again" was filling up for the evening festivities, and Muger, the fat, oily-faced proprietor, rubbed his hands and smirked contentedly as he glanced over the gathering; it looked like being a profitable night.

"Wonder what's bitin' Bart?" he muttered.

In truth, the Bar B owner's face justified the title by which he was commonly known. Standing apart, he was talking in low tones to Devint, and it was very evident that the conversation was not of a pleasing nature so far as the rancher was concerned. The cowboy had, in fact, been relating his encounter with Phil in the afternoon, and with the savage malice of one who delights in giving pain, he had lied, cunningly but convincingly. Bartholomew's rage, fanned to fury by the recital, showed plainly in his distorted features.

"I'll give five hundred bucks to the man who puts that pup outa business," he said vehemently, and then seeing the

satirical look of inquiry on the other's face, he added, "I'd do it myself an' be a heap pleased to, but it'd get me in wrong with the girl."

Devint nodded, satisfied with the explanation and the chance of earning the money. The fact that he had to extinguish a human life to do so meant nothing to him; he had killed men before, and for less reward. It was at this moment that Larry entered the saloon.

"There's the fella himself," Bart whispered, and immediately left the man whose gun he had hired and went out of the saloon.

Larry's quick eye had seen the movement, and he guessed that Devint had wasted no time in telling his tale. He looked round the room, nodded to Ridge, who was playing poker with two of his outfit and the storekeeper, Callahan, and then fixed his attention on Devint, who was now talking to three other men. His bloated, malignant face, raised strident voice, and covert glance told the Lazy M man what was coming.

"Bah! Wimmen is all alike," the bully sneered. "Take that Masters girl, f'r instance; yu'd have said, an' I'd have said, she was a lady, too high an' mighty to talk to the likes o' us, an' yet——" He paused and looked about, sure that he had the attention of all present, and then resumed, his sneer deepening, "I come on her this afternoon in Snake Coulee, a-kissin' an' cuddlin' one of her own men, a ornery forty per cowpunch, who ain't been in the outfit more'n a month or so."

He leered triumphantly at his audience, some of whom sniggered. Others who had been only half listening, suddenly became aware that there was a purpose behind the talk, and ceased their games to watch. Utter silence seized the room, and all eyes were turned upon the alert, tense figure of the Lazy M cowboy, at whom it was evident the slander had been directed.

"Devint!"

The word came like a shot from lips tightly set, and was

followed by a scraping of chairs and shuffling of feet, as those in the vicinity unostentatiously withdrew from the line of fire between the two men. Larry, poised on the balls of his feet, his right hand hanging by his side with fingers apart, glared at the bully through slitted eyes, oblivious to all else. The rage which filled him was not patent to the spectators, he was not even conscious of it himself; all he knew was that an unspeakably foul *thing* was before him, and he must destroy it.

As for the traducer, his brutal face betrayed one feeling only—that of venomous satisfaction; he had obtained the necessary provocation to justify the killing. He had no doubt of the issue; he was a practised gunman, and against an inexperienced youngster, handicapped by anger, he must win. And to shoot Severn's friend was the next best thing to shooting the foreman himself. So he grinned insolently as he answered:

"My name. Why, gents, if it ain't the guy I bin tellin' yu about—Phil Masters' latest fancy. Look at him a-blushin'."

In truth, Larry's face was red, but his voice was ice-cold, cutting, and charged with deadly menace; the added insult did not cause the loss of self-control.

"Devint, yu are a liar an' a coward," he said deliberately.

There could be only one reply to that. Stung as by the lash of a whip, the bully snatched at his gun.

"Yu damned whelp!" he roared.

The guns spat flame at the same second, and the Lazy M cowboy spun half-round as from a blow under the impact of a heavy slug in his left shoulder. Devint spluttered an oath, rocked on his feet, and pitched sideways to the floor, his pistol clattering beside him; he had been shot through the chest. Seeing that he was not yet dead, Larry staggered forward, and kicking away the weapon, knelt beside him.

"Devint," he said. "There's somethin' I want yu to know."

He whispered a few words and the eyes of the dying man

opened in wide surprise. "Hell!" he gasped. "Yu——" A raucous rattle in his throat choked further utterance, and his head fell back. Devint was done with bullying.

Larry climbed painfully to his feet and slumped into a chair someone pushed forward. His wound was bleeding, and he felt sick and giddy. Ridge and his men pounced upon him and began to bandage the hurt. The hush that had endured ended, and the spectators of the duel began to discuss it, crowding round to look at the stricken loser and the wounded victor. In the midst of the excitement the sheriff arrived, thrusting through the crowd.

"Hear there's bin a shootin'—allus happens when I ain't around," he grumbled. "Where's the corp?" Some of the crowd made way, and at the sight of the body, the sheriff gasped in surprise. "Why, it's Devint," he said. "I thought—they told me it was someone else." An unprejudiced observer might have said that he was disappointed.

A dozen eager witnesses of the fight gave him the details and the officer's bilious eyes turned with evil satisfaction to the hurt cowboy.

"Well, yu've shore bin askin' for trouble, an' now yu got it," he said. "I'm guessin' this will put yu in the pen."

"Better guess again, sheriff, an' mebbe yu'll be right," suggested the drawling voice of the Lazy M foreman.

He had come in unobserved, and now stood leaning idly against the bar, his thumbs hooked in his belt, and a look of mingled amusement and contempt on his face. Tyler jerked round, his hand flying to his gun-butt.

"Don't yu," urged the newcomer gently. "Yu ain't no more fit to die than yu are to live."

Tyler's face turned a pasty yellow; his gesture had been a bluff, and he was conscious that the other man knew it. He had no intention of forcing a fight with this cold-blooded, mocking devil. The entry of the Bar B owner heartened him, and he tried to gather together the shattered fragments of his dignity.

"As sheriff o' thisyer town——" he began.

"Yo're a hopeless failure—yu needn't tell us," Severn interposed. "Now, see here, sheriff. Our distinguished citizen, Mister Bartholomew, has joined us. He don't know nothin' o' this ruckus, o' course. S'pose yu ask his opinion."

By this time Bartholomew had elbowed his way through the company, and Severn had not failed to note his fleeting expression of chagrin when he saw Devint's body, nor the poisonous flash of hatred directed at Larry. But he instantly got control of his features again, and listened unmoved while the sheriff, anxious to transfer his burden of responsibility, related the facts. He saw at once the position into which Severn had so astutely jockeyed him. As a friend of Phil Masters he could not condemn the action of her defender. He did not hesitate.

"The skunk deserved to die, an' if this fella hadn't rubbed him out I'd 'a' done it myself," he said, with a savage emphasis which convinced many of his hearers. "I was talkin' to him on'y a bit ago, but he took damn good care not to blackguard Miss Masters to me." He glared round. "If there's a man here who ain't satisfied that Devint was lyin', p'raps he'll step forward." No one responding to the invitation, he turned to the sheriff. "Yu say it was an even break?"

"I didn't see the scrap, but I'm told so," Tyler had to admit.

"There ain't nothin' to do then," the rancher said, and with a sneer to Severn, "Yu can take yore man away, but he'd better watch out; mebbe he won't be so lucky next time."

"I reckon the Lazy M can take care of itself," the foreman told him.

With the help of Ridge and his two riders, the wounded man was conveyed to the ranch. This time Phil, hearing them arrive, thrust aside her scruples and went to meet them. At the sight of Larry held on his horse by two of the others, her heart seemed to turn over.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Barton had a run-in with Devint, an' is drilled through the shoulder—nothin' serious," Severn assured her.

"And Devint?"

"Cashed," was the brief reply.

The girl shuddered and asked no more. Larry had killed a man. Product of the West though she was, the news affected her like a blow. Nevertheless, at her orders, Barton was carried to the ranch-house and installed in Philip Masters' bed. As she explained to Severn, it would be easier for Dinah and herself to tend him there than in the bunk-house. The invalid himself, though weak and in pain, made light of his injury. What hurt him much more was the cold and aloof attitude of the girl. When his wound had been re-dressed, he seized a moment when he was alone with her.

"I'm right distressed to give yu all this trouble," he said. "Yu oughta let the boys look after me."

She shook her head, and then, "Oh, why did you do it? To cold-bloodedly go in search of a fellow-creature to kill him; it is horrible."

She saw his pale face flush and the lines about his mouth harden.

"Devint's kind ain't fellow-creatures no more than a rattler is," he said slow'y. "Let me tell yu somethin' about him. He an' some others once hanged an old man on a charge they knew he was innocent of. Devint put the noose round his neck, an' because he spoke, struck him in the face. Think of it, a man old enough to be his father, his hands tied, about to die an unjust an' shameful death, an' he hit him. That's a true story."

"But why should you punish him—there's a law to do that," she protested.

"What I've told yu happened ten years ago; the law is a mite slow," he said, and after a pause, "I would do the same again."

She knew that he was right; men like Devint and Geevor were enemies of their kind and must be dealt with but she

would not admit it. She knew, too, that had anyone but Larry done the killing it would not have affected her so deeply, but this again she would not admit, even to herself.

It was not until the following morning that she heard the real story of the shooting. She had ridden in to Hope, and had just dismounted in front of Callahan's store when Bartholomew came along. His face grew darker at the sight of her.

"'Lo, Phil," he said. "Reckon you'll allow now that I was right. You see what's come o' yore foolishness, ridin' around with a hand; one man dead an' another perforated."

"But that had nothing to do with it," she cried.

"It had everythin' to do with it," Bartholomew said angrily. "Devint's in the 'Come Again' shootin' off his mouth 'bout seein' you an' that pup kissin' an' cuddlin' in Snake Coulee, an' Barton tells him he is a liar."

Phil's heart sang within her. Larry had fought for her good name; he was not a cold-blooded slayer.

"I got there too late, or I'd 'a' wiped the houn' out myself," the Bar B owner went on. "O' course I don't believe it, but it ain't a very nice tale for a fella to hear about his future wife."

The girl looked up quickly. "I am not that, Mr. Bartholomew," she said. "If I have ever given you any reason to think I might be, I am sorry. You must forget it."

Her tone was cold and decisive, and a spasm of rage contracted the rancher's features. He knew that she meant every word, but he would not allow himself to think so. With an effort he forced a smile.

"Aw, don't get sore at me, Phil," he said placatingly. "I haven't got the trick o' makin' pretty speeches, but I want you, girl, an' I ain't takin' that as yore final answer."

"I shall not change," she said quietly, and walked away.

Bartholomew stared after her for a moment, his rage again uppermost, and then turned and strode up the street. Blind with passion, he blundered into a pedestrian coming the other way, and with an oath and a sweep of his fist,

hurled him from the board sidewalk into the dusty roadway. The victim of his wrath, a smallish man who wore a stubble of grey beard and a patch over one eye, picked himself up and glared malevolently. He was wearing a gun, and Phil fully expected to see the bully shot down, but with a rumbled threat the stranger went on his way, directing a curious glance at the girl as he passed her.

CHAPTER XIV

THE discovery of Phil's real state of mind regarding him was a bitter blow to Bartholomew's hopes and his vanity. To describe him as being in love with the girl would be paying him an undeserved compliment, for his was a nature incapable of such a sentiment, but he had a desire for her, and a still stronger one for her inheritance. The Lazy M added to his own ranch would make him a power in the Territory, and power was the god he worshipped. So that for the rest of the day his outfit had a trying time, and when Penton dropped in at the Bar B ranch-house in the evening, he found the owner in anything but a pleasant frame of mind. The foreman, who had not seen him for twenty-four hours, came to the point at once.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Damn near everythin'," was the surly reply. "Heard about Devint?"

"I just met up with him," Penton said.

"What? Devint's dead. Yu ain't drunk, are yu?" snapped the rancher.

"Not so as yu'd notice it," Penton told him. "Like I said, I met up with Devint—he's hangin' on the tree by Forby's shack, an' there's a fourth notch cut."

Bartholomew glared at him. "Severn's still playin' that fool game, is he?" he growled.

"Yu can call it that, but so far he's took all the tricks," the other observed. "Guessin' that Darby has squared hisself, that leaves yu an' me as the remainin' candidates for this tree decoratin'. Speakin' personal, my neck suits me the way it is, an' I don't want it stretched, not any."

Bartholomew made a gesture of impatience. "Pity yu

don't say somethin' when yu talk," he said with heavy sarcasm.

"Yu oughta done what I said an' bumped Severn off right away," Penton told him. "The girl would 'a' found some means o' gettin' round Embley. It ain't too late now—she'd soon forget him."

"Damnation! She don't care no more for Severn than a cat likes swimmin'," Bart burst out. "It's that cursed pup what downed Devint."

He related his meeting with Phil in the morning.

"So she give you the frozen mitt, eh?" Penton said. "That's a hoss with a different brand, ain't it? I reckon yu gotta say farewell to the Lazy M, Bart, an' be content to be second-best man at the weddin'."

The big man looked at the bitter, sarcastic face of the speaker, and his own grew blacker.

"I ain't feelin' funny, Penton," he warned.

"I don't see nothin' humorous about it my own self," his foreman rejoined. "I thought mebbe I was expressin' yore own sentiments, though I gotta admit I ain't ever found yu a quitter before."

"An' I don't aim to be now," the Bar B owner said harshly. "What I go after, I get, come hell or high water. It ain't goin' to be as easy as I hoped, that's all. We gotta take chances."

"Well, we've done that afore an' got away with it," Penton allowed. "No means o' gettin' Embley on our side, I s'pose?"

Bartholomew's smile was satanic. "Yu must be a blighted thought-reader, Pent," he said. "Yes, there is a way, but I ain't got it worked out yet. For now, just keep on puttin' it about that Severn likely rubbed out Masters."

Penton nodded. "Can't pin Stevens on him too, eh?" he asked.

"It wouldn't do," Bart said. "He could easy prove he warn't in the neighbourhood then."

"Gettin' rid o' Stevens to make room for Severn didn't do us no good," the foreman remarked.

"Yo're damn right, it didn't, but who'd 'a' thought Masters would bring in a stranger?" Bartholomew growled. "We reckoned on his givin' the job to Devint."

"Masters warn't quite so dumb as we figured," Penton said as he went out.

Bartholomew's grunt was one of affirmation; he was beginning to realise that he had underrated the late owner of the Lazy M.

* * * * *

It was a message from Ridge, conveyed by one of his riders, that brought Severn into Hope several days after the shooting. On his way to Bent's, where the X T man had arranged to meet him, the foreman sensed a difference in the attitude of the inhabitants towards himself. Several men to whom he had nodded or spoken before, passed without apparently seeing him. Ridge, who was waiting, soon explained the reason for this.

"Ain't wantin' to make more trouble for yu, but I reckon yu oughta know that it's bein' generally spread around that yu downed Masters," the rancher said bluntly.

"Bart's men seem to be doin' the talkin'," Bent added. "Me an' Ridge thought yu might have a word to say about it."

Severn's eyes darkened. "I have," he said quietly. "I'm agoin' up to the 'Come Again' right now to say it—to Mister Bartholomew."

"Yu ain't goin' alone, neither," the X T man put in.

"If I could leave here——" the saloon-keeper began, but Severn waved him to silence.

"I'm obliged, but stay put, old-timer," he said. "No call for yu to mix in this."

The big bar-room at the "Come Again" was well patronised, and had Severn needed confirmation of the rumour about himself, the fact that only one or two men

returned his greeting would have provided it. Bartholomew, Penton, Martin and several others were standing in a group. The Lazy M foreman walked straight up to them.

"Bartholomew," he said. "I hear yo're accusin' me o' murderin' Masters."

The big man was obviously nonplussed for a moment; he had not expected such a direct challenge. But he soon recovered his poise, and with a sneering grin at those about him, retorted :

"Well, s'pos'n it's so; what about it?"

"On'y this," Severn said coolly. "Yu will produce any evidence yu got, eat yore words, or—fight."

"I ain't takin' orders from yu," Bartholomew replied.

"No? Well, yo're takin' this, yu dirty coward," Severn flashed back.

With the words, he stepped forward and his open hand slapped the Bar B owner smartly across the cheek. The force of the blow was such that the recipient staggered back, his face livid. With an inarticulate growl of fury he snatched at his gun. He had got it half out of the holster when a drawling voice warned :

"I wouldn't."

Bartholomew hesitated, glaring. Severn's right hand Colt was covering him, though no man had seen him pull it. A gasp of astonishment came from the onlookers; Black Bart was esteemed the quickest on the draw for miles round, and he had been hopelessly beaten. For perhaps thirty seconds there was a tense, heart-stopping silence, and then the man who had the drop spoke :

"Yu went for yore gun, Bartholomew, an' I got every right to down yu, but—stand awful still; a move of one inch'll land yu plumb in hell."

The acid in the voice bit into the big man's brain. His hand was still on his gun, but he dared not draw; he knew that before he could get it out, hot lead would be tearing through his body. That crouching figure with the narrowed implacable eyes would not hesitate. He had but to raise

the thumb holding back the hammer, for, as the spectators quickly noted, Severn's guns had no triggers; he "fanned" them, thereby gaining the split-second which meant all the difference between life and death.

Helpless as a tied steer, Bartholomew stood waiting the will of the man he hated. Slowly Severn backed several paces, and then the gun at his hip roared. The bullet struck Bartholomew's tilted-back hat just where the heavy band met the forehead, grazing the skin and ripping the article from the wearer's head. Four more shots came in rapid succession, and tiny spots of blood at the tops and lobes of the target's ears showed where they had gone. Bartholomew stood like a thing of stone, beads of perspiration on his brow, his eyes like live coals.

"I've shown yu how easy it would be for me to kill yu," Severn said quietly. "But for reasons o' my own, I'm agoin' to let yu live a bit longer."

The foreman's pronouncement relaxed the terrific tension of the room in some degree, but all knew the incident was not over. The reprieve from what appeared to be certain death brought back a little of his habitual insolence to Bartholomew, and he waited with a bitter sneer on his face for the next move. When the foreman spoke again, his voice was low, vibrant.

"I've been told, Bartholomew, that yu are anxious to get yore hands on me," he stated. "I'm givin' yu the opportunity now. Shuck yore belt."

For an instant the rancher stared in surprise, and then a gleam of unholy joy shone in his eyes. There was no man in the Territory who could live with him in a rough and tumble encounter; the lamb had come willingly to the slaughter. His astonishment was shared by the others in the room, all of whom knew the big man's reputation. Ridge's expression betrayed deep concern.

"Yu must be loco, Severn," he whispered. "They say he killed a fella with his bare hands in Desert Edge."

"Don't yu worry, old-timer," was the quiet reply.

Both men removed their vests, belts and spurs, while eager hands pushed aside tables and chairs, clearing a space round which Muger's customers, drinks and games forgotten, ranged themselves in close-pressed ranks. Every moment the door opened to admit newcomers as the tidings of the impending battle spread, until nearly the entire male population was congregated around the arena. A clamour of arguing voices had succeeded the silence.

Amidst it all stood Severn, watching his man, a surge of satisfaction in his heart. He knew that he was taking a great risk—his opponent was bigger-built, heavier, and though older, still in the prime of life—but he did not care. He was a primitive man again, fighting with Nature's weapons; he might be beaten, but even that did not matter if he could first sate his lust of the moment—to hurt his foe. He wanted to smash the sneering lips, to feel the bones of his clenched hands sinking into the flesh of the gross body, to strike and hear the gasp of pain as the blow went home. Yet possessed as he was by this passion to punish, he was cool, collected.

To the onlookers the contest seemed almost unfair. They saw the great bulk of the rancher, whose every movement brought the muscles rippling into ridges beneath his shirt, and contrasted it with the slim, wiry figure of the puncher. Few of them had any doubt as to the issue. But there was one factor of which they were ignorant; the smaller man, in addition to a wide experience of the rough and tumble Western fistic encounters, had considerable knowledge of the more scientific methods of the East, in which ringcraft and clever head and footwork could be made to more than compensate for weight and reach. It would be brute force against brains.

"Bart'll eat him, without salt," said one.

"He'll find him a tough mouthful," retorted his neighbour, who had been eyeing the puncher closely. "Barb-wire an' rawhide is what that fella's made of, an' he's fit."

"Allasame, I'm layin' two to one on the big 'un," the first speaker said loudly.

"Take that—to fifty," snapped Ridge instantly.

One or two other of Severn's friends supported him, but they were few, and Bartholomew laughed when the odds were increased and still there were no takers.

"Too bad yu can't get no bets, boys, for it's goin' to be easy money," he called out. "I'll break every bone in his body."

"Chatter is cheap," Severn retorted. "Come an' do it, Mister—Mask."

He had not raised his voice, and probably few, if any, of the jostling, excited crowd caught the epithet. But Bartholomew heard it, was guilty of a little start of surprise, and swore when he saw the foreman's grin of comprehension. It had been the merest shot in the dark, based on the vaguest suspicions, but—

"Daft, ain't you?" sneered the big man. "Well, I'm agoin' to knock sense out of or into yu."

He flexed his mighty muscles, stepped forward, and a sudden hush fell upon the room as Severn went to meet him. There were no seconds, no timekeeper, none of the usual concomitants of a pugilistic encounter. It would be a stark frontier fight, enduring as long as the men could stand on their legs. Save for the use of weapons, any means of maiming was deemed permissible.

For a short moment the two men faced one another, and then Severn, determined to get in the first punch, darted in like lightning, drove a right and left just above Bartholomew's belt-line and was out of reach before the other had recovered his breath. With a bellow of rage—for he had figured on commencing the combat—the rancher rushed in, swinging his formidable fists, dealing blows which had they landed might well have ended the battle then and there. But the foreman was wary; he knew that at close quarters he would be at a disadvantage; his only hope was to keep his opponent on the move, jumping in when opportunity offered to strike.

Bartholomew fell into the trap; believing that his man was afraid, he went after him eagerly, only to find that the light, quick-footed puncher was somewhere else. The tactics irritated not only the rancher but his friends, and shouts of derision, mingled with entreaties to "stand an' fight like a man" came from the spectators.

Severn took no notice; he knew perfectly well what he was about; it was not the first time he had fought a bigger man than himself. Time after time he darted in, slammed one fist and then the other into his opponent's body, and got away laughing. The shouting crowd, thrusting and squirming to get a good view, swayed back and forth, gradually narrowing the space cleared for the combatants. Severn, springing back before an onslaught, cannoned against one of the Bar B outfit, and was hurled forward almost into Bart's clutch. Ducking swiftly, he turned and drove a vengeful fist into the scowling face behind him.

"I can spare that one," he grinned. "An' that."

The second blow reached Bart's jaw for the first time and rocked him on his feet. The foul play brought Ridge's gun into his hand.

"The next fella as interferes in this scrap won't see the end of it," he shouted. "Get back an' give 'em room."

Before the menacing gun and grim glare of the speaker, the line of onlookers ebbed like a wave on the seashore; the X T man had a reputation for meaning what he said. The offender, who had dropped senseless, was flung backwards to the floor, his neighbours too intent on the battle to care what became of him. Dust rose in clouds from the boards under the stamping, scuffling feet of fighters and followers. Tobacco smoke hung like a haze over the room; the smell of kerosene, and an intolerable heat added to the discomfort. Shouts of encouragement, mostly for Bartholomew, mingled with the curses of those unfortunate enough to get hurt in the melee.

Despite all that Ridge and one or two others could do, the ring soon grew smaller again, and Severn found himself

forced into close quarters with the big man who, quick to see his advantage, rushed in, flailing the air with his great arms. The puncher, unable to retreat, dodged what blows he could, took the remainder, and fought back doggedly, aiming for the body, which he had already selected as Bartholomew's weak spot. His lips drawn back in a snarling smile, his jaws clenched and narrowed eyes alert, he endured a shower of blows which would have beaten a less agile man to the ground, and every now and then his fists thudded into the bigger man's midriff. The succession of punches in one place was beginning to have its effect, the Bar B man was breathing gustily, and he winced obviously when Severn got a hit home.

The Lazy M man, too, was being severely punished; he could not evade all the blows, and presently a whirling right caught and sent him to his knees. Amidst a howl of jubilation from his supporters, Bart jumped forward and aimed a venomous kick at the puncher's head. Severn, on his feet but not upright, twisted aside, caught the big man's ankle and stood up. Thrown off his balance, Bartholomew crashed to the floor and lay there breathless and half stunned. Severn stood watching him, glad of the respite. In similar circumstances, the Bar B owner would have stamped the life out of his foe, but the cowboy did not fight that way. A tense silence gripped the spectators as they waited, and then someone said satirically:

"Goo'-night, Bart; pleasant dreams."

As if electrified, the fallen giant got to his feet and scowled in the direction of the speaker.

"I'll 'pleasant-dream' yu when I've finished this damned four-flusher," he threatened, and sprang at Severn.

This time, the foreman, instead of retreating, came to meet him, and the next few minutes were an orgy of sheer ferocity; neither man made any attempt to guard himself, each being intent only on hurting the other. Severn knew that he was made to do it, but the lust to pound the poisonously puffed face of the coward who had tried to kick him when

he was down was too strong. In this he had succeeded, for one of Bart's eyes was closing, and the blood was streaming from a cut in his cheek; Severn's face also was bruised and gashed. He felt, too, that he was weakening, his head throbbed, and his arms were like lead, but he knew his opponent was in no better shape. In truth, Bartholomew's fall had shaken him; he was finding it difficult to get air enough into his lungs, his blows no longer had the same elasticity, and he moved more slowly.

"Even money the little 'un," shouted the man who had wished Bart "good-night."

If his purpose was to spur the big fellow to renewed efforts he accomplished it. Amidst the yells and oaths of the nearly demented audience, who had by now reduced the space for the battle by more than half, Bart closed, and the fight became a medley of flying fists again, from which came the thud of bone meeting bone, the sob of starved lungs, and the grunt which told of a blow successfully given. Suddenly Bartholomew drew himself up and swung his right arm. Severn saw the blow coming and stepped back, only to stumble over an outstretched foot and stagger sideways. The fist whistled harmlessly over his shoulder, but ere he could recover his balance, two great hands closed on his throat, the thumbs sinking in until they seemed to be crushing the bones. Choking, the lights of the saloon and the bestial ring of eager, writhing faces faded out, and he could see only that of his foe, a livid, malignant mask of savagery. With a last effort of expiring consciousness, he dashed his fist into it. For an instant all went dark, and then he opened his eyes to find Ridge and Callahan supporting him. Awkwardly sprawled on the floor lay the form of Bartholomew, breathing stertorously but senseless. Some of the crowd frankly smiled and gave him a cheer; others, if they felt hostile, took care not to show it. Severn grinned feebly; he was all in, and his throat made speech difficult.

"What happened?" he enquired.

"What happened?" repeated Ridge, his face split by a

wide smile. "Oh, nothin' much. Yu just tapped him on the chin an' he lay down to think it over. I reckon he's got his needin's for to-night, anyways. Come along to Bent's an' git cleaned up; yore face looks like an Injun massacre."

Almost unheeded by the milling throng round the fallen fighter, the three of them left the saloon. One man only watched them covertly—a short, middle-aged cowboy, with a dried-up wizened face, legs badly bowed by constant riding, and two worn, black-handled guns which hung low on his thighs. Severn saw him but took no notice.

"The son of a gun," muttered the stranger, with a twisted smile, and went in search of his horse.

An hour later, the foreman, having removed the traces of the combat as far as possible, set out for the Lazy M. Bitterly bruised and aching as he was, his principal feeling was one of deep satisfaction; he had set himself a task and had done it, and the recollection of the battered hulk he had left on the saloon floor paid in full for his present pain. About a mile from town his horse whickered, and an indistinct form showed from behind a bush at the side of the trail.

"H'ist 'em," said a voice, but there was a chuckle behind the command.

"H'ist nothin'," the traveller retorted. "Come outa that, yu ornery little runt, an' explain yoreself."

The bow-legged puncher who had been in the "Come Again" stepped into view.

"Orders from the boss," he grinned.

"So I ain't yore boss no longer, huh?" Severn queried.

"Didn't I say for yu to stay at the Y Z?"

"Orders from yore boss. Yessir, Miss Norry——" He paused at the other's laugh, and then resumed, "Oh, I know she's bin married two-three years, but she's still 'Miss Norry' to the outfit, an' allus will be. Well, she says, 'Snap, I got a letter from that man o' mine tellin' me everythin' is ca'm an' peaceful, an' things is workin' out fine."

It's shore too good to be true; the better he makes it, the wuss it is. Yu fork a cayuse an' mossey along." Reckon yu overplayed yore hand some."

The foreman grinned ruefully. "I'll never understand women," he said. "Yu can't fool 'em. If I'd told her things were a bit promiscuous, she'd 'a' sent yu just the same. How's everybody at the old homestead?"

"Fine as silk," Snap Lunt replied. "That yearling o' yores gets bigger while yu watch. I misdoubt he'll be a wuss hellion than his daddy. Tried to take my gun off'n me the other day, an' shore raised the roof when he couldn't have it."

"I'll bet he did—there ain't nothin' the matter with that young fella's lungs," the foreman agreed with paternal pride. "When d'yu get here, Snap?"

"Just in time for the show," Lunt said. "Yu ain't forgot how to use yore paws, Don."

"I ain't 'Don' around here, Snap; I'm Jim Severn, even when we seem to be alone," the other warned him. "Yu come near bein' in time for my funeral—I shore thought he'd get me."

"That last was a daddy of a wallop—me, I'd sooner be kicked by an outlaw hoss," Lunt told him. "I'm glad I come; things don't seem so painfully peaceful around here."

"To tell yu the truth, old-timer, they ain't all Sunday school," Severn admitted. "Listen, this is the way of it."

As briefly as possible he explained the situation, and the little gunman listened patiently to the end. Then in a rasping tone he said:

"Did I hear yu mention a fella called Shady?"

"Shore, a square-built chap, wide as he is long, pretty nigh. Know him?"

Snap's eyes gleamed. "His figure's the on'y square thing about him," he said huskily. "He bushwhacked a bunkie o' mine for his roll years ago. I'm *damned* glad I come. What yu want I should do?"

"Hang about in Hope, an' remember yu don't know me

for now," Severn answered. "Bent, who runs a saloon, is one white man, an' Ridge of the X T is another. Yu'll be my ace in the hole an' I shore got a good one. Better be driftin' now. S'long."

The newcomer climbed into his saddle and with a wave of his hand trotted towards town, while Severn went on his way to the ranch.

"Snap an' Larry an' m'self—that's three to draw to instead of a pair," he informed the air, and playfully pulled his pony's ears. "Boy, we'll beat 'em yet, an' it ain't no good yu standin' on one leg; use all four of 'em, yu misfit, an' get agoin'."

In fact, the unexpected advent of Snap Lunt, the grim little gunman from his own ranch, the Y Z, constituted a notable addition to his forces, and one that Severn, confident as he was in himself, was well content to have.

CHAPTER XV

AT breakfast in the bunkhouse next morning, the foreman's battered appearance excited speculation but no comment. Larry, whom he visited later, and whose room he managed to reach without encountering Miss Masters, was not so discreet. The invalid, sitting up in bed with one arm in a sling, was discovering that even a slug from a .45 may have compensations. He regarded his friend with frank amazement.

"Who might yu be?" he enquired truculently.

"I might be the President o' the United States, but I ain't," retorted Severn.

Larry looked at him critically. "I don't like 'em," he said.

"Don't like what, yu jackass?"

"Them alterations to yore face; it warn't nothin' to chuck a chest about afore, but yu ain't improved it any. It don't balance. Hi! get off that hat, yu Siwash!"

For the foreman, sitting down, had deliberately selected the chair on which Larry's Stetson reposed. He stood up and lifted the crushed headgear.

"Time yu had a new one," he commented.

"It is—now," the owner said sadly. "I ain't had it but a year—paid thirty wheels for it, too. Now look at it."

"I : m" said the foreman. "What did yu do with the pony?"

"What pony?" asked Larry unsuspectingly.

"The one they threw in with the hat," grinned the other, and then, "There, there, sick folk mustn't get all het up. How's the Princess treatin' yu these days?"

"She's a lady, Don," the boy replied.

"Yu call me that again an' I'll—tell her yo're a friend o' mine," Severn threatened.

"For the love o' Mike don't do that," the invalid implored. "I'm sorry, Jim, I forgot. Yu ain't told me the reason for the disguise yet."

"It ain't a disguise, yu chump. I had a triffin' argument with Mister Bartholomew last night, that's all."

"I might 'a'knowed it," Larry said disgustedly, when he had heard the details. "The minute I ain't around to look after yu——" He chortled joyously. "I'll bet he's feelin' sore this glad mornin'."

"He's got company there," the foreman reminded him.

"Gosh! he ain't a man—he's a gorilla." He rose to go.

"By the way, when yo're around again, if yu meet up with Snap in town, remember yu don't know him. Savvy?"

"Hi! what yu talkin' about?" queried the surprised youth. "Where's yore blamed hurry? Why can't yu tell a fella——" But Severn had vanished, and Larry swore in vain. "Can yu beat it?" he asked the empty room. "Saves up a bit o' news like that, fires it casual over his shoulder, an' leaves yu guessin'. 'Hawg' don't do him no justice at all."

Greatly to his satisfaction, the foreman managed to retreat without meeting the mistress of the house. In truth, the girl was sitting in her bedroom, staring blankly at the window, and wondering whether she was awake or dreaming. About to pay her customary visit to the sick man, she had paused at the door on hearing Severn's voice, and, though she blushed now to think of it, had stayed there to listen. She had heard enough to convince her that the foreman was masquerading under an assumed name, and that her patient was an old friend. Helplessly she strove to fathom the meaning of it all, but had to give it up in despair. The one clear point seemed to be that Larry had deceived her, and at the thought of this she melted into angry tears; there seemed to be no one she could trust.

* * * * *

Larry's surmise as to the owner of the Bar B was correct—he was sore both in body and mind. Ashamed to show his damaged face, he sulked in the ranch-house, brooding over his defeat. So far as bodily hurt was concerned he cared little, for that would pass, but the blow to his pride was one that seared his very soul, and he writhed at the memory, cursing the man who had dealt it, savagely and continuously. Penton found him so engaged, and there was a flicker of contempt in the foreman's expression as he listened.

"Cussin' ain't goin' to git us nowhere," he said quietly. "I think I got some news for yu—an' mebbe it ain't good news, neither."

The rancher took the cigar from between his puffed lips, his savage eyes gleaming in their swollen sockets; he was in the mood to quarrel with even his best friend. Penton knew this, but he was the one man at the Bar B who did not fear the owner.

"There ain't no good news nowadays seemin'ly," Bart growled. "Spill it, an' don't take a week."

"We got all the time there is, an' anyways, I ain't shore," Penton returned calmly. "Yu've allus been reckoned more than middlin' swift with a gun, Bart, ain't yu?"

"I never met up with a swifter," the other admitted.

"Till last night, huh?" Penton proceeded. "Severn made yu look *slow*. But yu wasn't—I never seen yu quicker, an' yet he beat yu to it—easy."

"Well?" said the big man sourly, for he did not relish this rubbing in of his discomfiture.

"Who cleaned up Tarman's gang over to Hatchett's Folly?" the foreman asked, and Bartholomew straightened up in his chair.

"Sudden," he said. "Yu tellin' me that Severn is——"

"I'm on'y guessin'," Penton broke in. "It sticks in my mind that Sudden's front name turned out to be Donald, an' that young side-kicker o' Severn's called him 'Don' that night in the 'Come Again.'"

The Bar B owner's swarthy face went a shade paler. If his foreman was right, he himself must have stood on the very brink of the Valley of Shadows when he had tried to draw on Severn. After the utter destruction of Tarman's band of range thieves,* Sudden, the so-called outlaw, had vanished, merged in the personality of a law-abiding cattleman, but his fame as a fighter was not forgotten.

"Sudden," Bartholomew muttered, half to himself. "What the hell would he be doin' over here?"

"Yu can search me," Penton replied. "But if it's him, we've bitten off a bigger mouthful than we bargained for. I never run across him, but I've heard a-plenty."

Bart sat silent, his damaged lips pursed into an ugly pout. When at length he looked up there was dogged determination in his outthrust jaw.

"Sudden or no, he's human, an' I'll get him, the swine," he snarled. "If the yarns about him is true, he come mighty near bein' stretched once or twice, an' his luck can't last for ever. Now, see here, keep this notion behind yore teeth; if it gets known in Hope, some o' them cowardly coyotes'll eat outa his hand from sheer funk."

"That's Gawspel truth," Penton agreed. "As for gettin' him, we gotta, or he'll get us. My medicine is a bullet in the back, but mebbe yu has other ideas."

"I'm goin' to see him hanged," the rancher spat out viciously. "Hanged on th' tree he's been usin' so freely, an' then I'll cut a notch as'll wipe out all the others."

Penton regarded him with a sardonic smile. "Fine," he said. "Yu got his consent, o' course?"

For an instant rage flamed in the bigger man's eyes, but he knew he could not afford to lose the foreman's services, so he swallowed the gibe.

"I gotta card up my sleeve no one else knows of," he said. "When the time comes I'll play that same; it's a shore winner, an' will take the pot."

"Well, yo're the doctor," Penton said. "Up to now

* Related in "The Range Robbers."

we've been playin' in pore luck, an' it's due to turn. If this chap is Sudden, what's his game? He ain't after the girl—he's tied up a'ready."

"He wants the ranch," Bart explained. "An' with Masters out o' the way——"

"S'pose he turns up agin," the other interrupted.

"Masters is cashed—yu can stick a pin in that," the rancher told him.

Penton's eyes gleamed evilly. "Shore o' that, are yu?" he grinned.

"Hold yore hosses—I didn't kill him, if that's what yo're thinkin'—he was a damn sight too useful to me; but somebody else did."

"But then the gal gits the ranch, in time, anyway."

"Shore, an' Severn's side-kicker gets the gal, or if that don't come off, well, she's mortal, ain't she? I dunno just how they got it framed up, but with Embley back o' them, it looks like money from home; but they got me to reckon with yet."

"They won't have if yu git into any gun play with Sudden," the foreman warned him.

"I ain't a kid," Bart growled. "Yu give Martin his orders."

Long after Penton had gone, the rancher sat there, chewing the butt of his cigar, his forehead ridged in a heavy frown. Despite his boastfulness, his foreman's news had shaken him. But the Lazy M was a prize worth fighting for, and—he hungered for the girl. A curse broke from his lips as he recalled their last meeting.

"I'll have her, willing or unwilling," he grated. "An' as for that damned interloper——"

* * * * *

Big Boy, having zigzagged his pony up the steep, sandy side of a gully and forced his way through the thick scrub at the top, suddenly pulled up with an oath of astonishment. Five or six hundred yards away on the open range, half a dozen men were leisurely gathering a herd of steers which

he knew to be the property of the Lazy M. He did not recognise the men, but the white handkerchiefs concealing the lower part of their faces told him all that was necessary. He tried to back into the brush unseen, but the vicious hum of a bullet past his ear warned him that they had been on the watch. Snatching out his rifle, he dived from the saddle and gained the shelter of a tangled tussock of grass. He had no sooner accomplished this than there came the thud of a striking slug, followed by the report, and his horse crashed down, quivered and lay still.

"Burn their ornery hides," the cowboy muttered, with a string of expletives which provided fully for the future of every one of the rustlers.

Thrusting the muzzle of his Winchester through the grass, he fired three rapid rounds, and had the satisfaction of seeing one of the strangers lurch in his saddle.

"Yu got me, yu coyotes," he snarled, "but I'll shore make yu pay first."

For he knew his situation was hopeless; they could surround and shoot him down at their leisure. To his surprise, however, they seemed more intent on getting the cattle out of range, and though he fired several times without doing any more damage, no shots came in reply. As quickly as possible, the herd was rounded up and driven off by the horsemen. When the raiders had become a mere blot on the plain, the cowboy arose from his place of concealment.

"Well, if that don't beat ice in hell," he ejaculated. He surveyed his dead mount ruefully. "Yu warn't never a prize-winner, old fella, but I'd shore give a coupla months' pay for yu now," he said. "I must be near ten miles from the ranch, cuss the rotten luck!"

To men who almost live on horseback, walking is an abomination, and the puncher shuddered at the prospect of a long tramp under the blazing sun in his tight high-heeled boots, and carrying a forty-pound saddle in addition to his rifle and other trappings. But it had to be done; the news of the robbery must be got to the Lazy M with-all speed.

and bestowing another hearty curse on those responsible, he set out.

The journey proved to be all he anticipated, and more. The first mile or two brought blisters on his feet, and every step became an agony. The saddle, which for convenience and as a protection from the sun, he carried on his head, seemed to weigh double what he knew it did, and the heavy wooden stirrups banged his body as he staggered over the stretches of sand and bunch-grass, and every bump brought blasphemy until his parched throat could no longer form the phrases.

Plugging doggedly on, sometimes only at the pace a man could crawl, he estimated he had done half the trip. Then he came upon a little stream, fringed with willows and cottonwoods, and after drinking and refilling his canteen, he flung himself down to rest in the welcome shade. His feet felt as if they were on fire, and he was tempted to bathe them in the cool water, but he knew he would never get his boots on again. The approach of evening brought relief from the scorching sun, but none for the blistered extremities of the traveller. Staggering, stumbling, and whispering strange oaths, he plodded on, and at last, through the gathering gloom, he glimpsed a light shining amidst the black bulk of buildings. He almost crawled the final few hundred yards, and lurching into the bunkhouse, flung the saddle on the floor and flopped into the nearest chair. Naturally his appearance aroused comment.

"What yu bin walkin' for?" Linley asked.

"'Cause I ain't got no wings, yu lunkhead," retorted the weary one. "Gimme some grub an' fetch Jim."

Severn heard the story in silence.

"White Masks again, huh?" he said. "An' they took about fifty head?"

"Me an' the little old gun made gettin' more a chancy business," Big Boy explained.

"Wonder they didn't wipe yu out fust," Darby said.

"They hadn't the guts; I'd 'a' got some of 'em."

Severn shook his head. "I'm guessin' that don't explain it," he said dubiously. "Anyways, we go after them cows at daybreak, an' in case it's a trap, we'll be full strength."

* * * * *

On the eastern horizon, a golden glow which deepened and spread betokened the dawn of another day. Over the plain and foothills a purplish mist hovered, and in the distance, from the peaks of the Pinnacles, great streamers of vapour drifted across the sky like smoke from mammoth chimney-stacks. The Lazy M was bubbling with excitement. With the exceptions of Larry and the cook, Severn was taking the whole outfit. He meant to be in a position not only to regain the stolen stock, but to punish the thieves. That he was playing into the hands of his enemies he had yet to learn.

The most disgruntled man at the ranch was Larry. Long after the departure of the outfit, he continued to bewail his misfortune, even the presence of his lady failing to console him.

"Cuss this shoulder," he grumbled. "I'm a-missin' all the fun." Instantly from Phil's expression he saw that he had said the wrong thing. "Aw, o' course I don't quite mean that, but——"

"You would rather be riding with the boys," she finished quietly—too quietly, had Larry been versed in the ways of women.

Red of face and very uncomfortable, he tried to wriggle out of the tight place he had got himself into.

"I owe them White Masks somethin'," he argued. "Cowardly coyotes."

"In my opinion, hiding behind a mask is no more cowardly than hiding behind a false name," she said, and went out of the room.

"Now what the hell did she mean by that?" the invalid asked himself. "I shore slipped up that time, but she

needn't to have got so sore. Wonder how the boys are gettin' on?"

The "boys" were, as a matter of fact, not unduly hurrying. They knew there was no likelihood of catching up with the rustlers, and with the possibility of a long trail ahead, it was necessary to save the horses as much as possible.

Big Boy, who, refreshed by food and a few hours' sleep, had insisted on joining the party, guided them to the spot where he had been so ignominiously "set afoot." They found the carcass of the horse, already picked clean, and soon struck the trail of the stolen steers. It led northwards towards the mountains, the first mile or so being over level prairie. Then it turned sharply to the right, taking them into a jumble of tree-clad slopes, gorges scooped out of the living rock, thorny thickets, and little savannahs of lush grass through which the horses waded belly deep.

"They shore wanted a job, takin' cattle through here," old Rayton said. "Must be tryin' to lose 'em."

Severn had already seen that the rustlers were breaking fresh trail; apparently they were not taking the steers to the valley below the Cavern. The fact that they had gone to all this trouble and had made no effort to hide their tracks was giving him uneasiness. Why had they allowed Big Boy to get away and been content with such a small gather of beeves when so many more could have been taken? As mile after mile of the arduous trail dropped behind them, and they got still further from the bandits' headquarters, the foreman became more disturbed in mind. Was the theft of this small herd a ruse to draw his men away and leave the range defenceless for a bigger raid? He began to wish he had brought only half the outfit, but it was too late now for regrets; he could only go on.

Noon came and went, and then, threading their way through a deep, rocky fissure no more than a dozen yards wide, they heard the bellow of a steer. Severn gave the word for caution, guns were got in readiness, and the party pressed on. The fissure gave way to an open stretch of

grass, walled in by dense, prickly shrub, and in the centre, peacefully browsing, was the stolen herd. Fearing an ambush, the cowboys waited a while, and then Severn, Darby and Big Boy rode into the open. No shots saluted them; the cattle were unattended. Darby looked at his foreman in bewilderment.

"Odd number, this," he said. "They ain't tried to blot their tracks. Looks as if they brought 'em here a-purpose for us to find."

"I'm afraid yo're right, Darby," Severn agreed. "They baited a hook an' I bit it good an' plenty. Why they wanted us outa the way, I dunno, but I'm goin' to see, *pronto*. Three o' yu will be enough to drive the herd back; the rest will come with me."

Leaving Big Boy and two others to put the cattle on the range again, the foreman and the remainder of the outfit headed for the Lazy M. Speed was impossible on such a difficult trail, even had their mounts been capable of it, and though no time was wasted, it was nightfall ere they sighted the ranch buildings. Beyond the fact that no lights were showing, everything seemed to be as usual. They pulled up at the bunkhouse with a shrill whoop, a hint to the cook to get busy, but there was no answer.

"Where the hell's that no 'count nigger?" Linley wanted to know. "If he don't rustle his pots an' pans right speedy, I'll shore comb his wool."

"Somethin' wrong here—let's try the house," Severn said, and led the way.

The ranch-house was dark and silent. The foreman found the back door unfastened, and striding in was brought to a stop by a muffled groan. He struck a match and saw Jonah, tied to a chair and gagged, gazing at him with goggling eyes in which fear gave way to relief when he recognised the visitor. Severn lighted the lamp, drew his knife and cut away the gag and bonds.

"What the devil's happened?" he asked.

It was some moments before the cook was able to answer,

and then his stiffened jaws could only articulate, "Dem White Masks—dey got Miss Phil."

Leaving the others to get the story out of him, Severn sprang up the stairs. In the girl's room he discovered Dinah, tied up and incoherent with fear. Setting her free, he went to seek Larry. He found that young man in like case, save that he was able to express himself and did so with great freedom the moment the gag was removed.

"Yu cuss pretty near like a growed man," his friend said satirically. "S'pose now yu tell us somethin'."

It was not a long story. Early in the afternoon Larry had heard the sound of horses and the mutter of voices outside and had concluded that the outfit had returned sooner than expected. Then his door opened, and instead of the pleasant sight of his young nurse, he saw two masked men, one of whom immediately trained a gun on him while the other tied him up.

"An' with this crippled wing I couldn't do nothin' but say what I thought of 'em," Larry explained. "I shore did that till they jammed that rag in my mouth. What were they after?"

"The girl, an' they got her," Severn told him, and the sick man's language became more lurid.

"Aw, what's the use—cussin' never cured anythin'," the foreman commented.

Before the young man could frame a fitting retort his friend had gone, but he was back again in a few moments.

"They ain't taken it," he said.

"Ain't taken what, yu idjit—the bunkhouse?" Larry asked petulantly.

"No, the herd money."

"Perhaps they couldn't find it."

"Shucks, they couldn't 'a' missed it if they'd looked. It's in Masters' desk, the likeliest place; just where a girl would hide anythin'. What d'yu reckon the game is?"

"Mister Shady wants to see yu again; he'll offer to swap the girl for yu," Larry suggested.

This explanation did not satisfy the foreman. "I'm figurin' there's more to it than that," he said. "Mebbe we'll know suthin' else in the mornin'."

"Ain't yu goin' to do nothin' to-night?" his friend asked indignantly.

"Shore thing. I'm goin' to sleep, an' yu better do the same," Severn grinned, and did not wait to hear the commentary.

Going down to the bunkhouse he swallowed a much-needed meal and retired to his own quarters. Here, he remembered for the first time, that he had not seen anything of Quirt; he called and whistled but the dog seemed to have disappeared. An examination of his room showed that it had not been disturbed, and he was forced to the conclusion that the girl was the sole object of the raid. What did they want with her? Was the outrage a come-back on the part of Shadwell? He did not think this, for the crime was of a nature to raise the whole country against the outlaws. Only one other man could have any interest in stealing the girl. Had Black Bart carried out the abduction, masking his men to make it appear the work of the bandits, or—a vague suspicion, born of the chance accusation he had made just before the fight in the "Come Again," and which had been dormant at the back of his mind ever since, began to obtrude itself.

CHAPTER XVI

DESPITE the strenuous work of the preceding day, sunrise found the Lazy M outfit busily preparing for whatever task Severn had to set them. The customary air of care-free gaiety had given place to a grim seriousness, for apart from the fact that their young mistress was very popular, the riders regarded her taking off as a personal insult; they had been made to look foolish, and it rankled. As Gentle crisply put it:

"No damn gang o' cow-thieves can run a blazer on this crowd an' get away with it."

Therefore they looked closely to their weapons, filled belts with ammunition, carefully picked and saddled their mounts, and waited expectantly for Severn, who had breakfasted in his own shack. Presently he stepped out, and at the same moment came a faint bark. Severn turned just as Quirt limped up and dropped panting at his master's feet. Stooping to pat the dog, the foreman saw a glimpse of white in the thick hair of the animal's neck. It proved to be a twist of paper, secured by a thin raw-hide thong. Printed in pencil were the words:

"The White Masks have the girl at the Cavern. Hurry.
A FRIEND."

The missive was identical in character with the others he had received and the foreman stared at it in perplexity. Who could the mysterious correspondent be? Certainly not Darby, for he had been with the rest of the outfit all the previous day. Evidently the dog had sneaked after the girl's captors and so provided the sender with a means of despatch-

ing his message. Severn scratched Quirt's head affectionately.

"Yu shore pull yore weight in this outfit," he said. "Hey, Jonah, here's another breakfast wanted an' see that it's a good one. He's fetched news."

The cook's face lighted up when he saw the dog, for they were now good friends. Quirt limped after him into the kitchen, and the foreman explained the situation to the men, asking for suggestions.

"What about sending to Hope for the sheriff an' a posse?" offered one.

The foreman shook his head. "Tyler don't like us none," he said. "An', anyways, I figure this is mainly a Lazy M job. I'm proposin' that we head for the X T, get Ridge an' some o' his boys, an' smoke these coyotes outa their holes."

A chorus of "Yo're shoutin'" and "That's the play," showed that this plan of action was fully in accord with the feelings of the men, and without further loss of time a start was made. Larry, whose hurt did not permit him to go, lay fuming helplessly in his room.

"Don't yu worry, boy, we'll get yore Princess," the foreman assured him. "An' make a clean-up, too, while we're about it."

But Larry was not to be comforted: that this lady should be in danger and he unable to go to her assistance was a bitter bullet to bite on. In his mind he could picture the band of hard-riding, grim, relentless punchers, thrusting the miles behind them on their mission of vengeance, and he would have given ten years of his life to be with them.

Knowing they could get fresh ones at the X T, the rescuers did not spare their mounts, and the trail being an easy one they arrived in good time. The rancher himself welcomed them with a whoop of delight, and when Severn explained the reason for their visit his enthusiasm equalled their own.

"Will we help? Why, yu can't lose us," he boomed. "Kidnappin' folks outa their own homes in broad daylight,

eh? Somebody's gotta show these skunks that they don't own the country, I guess. Know anythin' 'bout him?"

He jerked a thumb towards the bench outside the bunk-house door, where lolled Snap Lunt, his hat pushed back, his bowed legs outstretched, and a cigarette drooping from his thin lips. His eyes met those of the visitor with the stolid immobility of a redskin.

"One o' yore outfit?" asked Severn.

"Not yet; drifted in 's'morning an' I reckon he's lookin' for a job though he ain't asked for it," the ranchman replied. "What yu think of him?"

"Looks like he'd be useful in a ruckus," the foreman said meaningly. "Them guns he's totin' ain't by no means new."

"Yo're right," Ridge returned. "Well, here's his chance to make good. I'll give him an invite to the dance. Betcha a dollar he ducks."

"It's plain robbery but I'll take yu," Severn said, and smiled when Ridge, having spoken to the little gunman, came back and flipped a coin over to him.

"Glad it warn't more," he said. "Cripes, yu'd 'a' thought I was offerin' him a drink."

"I know the breed—he'd sooner fight than eat," the Lazy M man said, and then, seeing a rosy little face peeping at him round the jamb of the door, he beckoned.

"One o' your'n?" he asked.

"Shore," replied the rancher. "Hey, Thimble, come an' say 'Howdy' to Mr. Severn."

An apple-checked, tow-headed maid of about eight emerged from the doorway and came towards him, scuffling her toes in the dust, and looking shyly at the big stranger. Severn grinned engagingly at her and set her on his knee.

"I'm bettin' yu don't like candy," he said.

"Oh, I do," she replied.

"Then I lose," he told her gravely. He slipped the dollar into her chubby hand, was rewarded with a hug, and then she ran away to show her prize to her mother. Severn

grinned at his host. "Reckon that squares us," he said. "That wărn't a fair bet; that fella's a friend o' mine. He ain't here to be hired, but yu can trust him the limit."

Ridge shook a fist at him. "Yu old pirut, yo're too damned deep for me," he said. "But I'm backin' yore play."

Mounted on fresh horses and reinforced by Ridge, five of his men, and Lunt, the expedition set out again, their objective the great tooth in the range beneath which Severn knew the bandits' retreat was situated. The few miles of grazing were soon covered, and then they reached the foothills and broken country out of which the mountains rose. Here the going was difficult, for there was no trail, and they had to twist and turn, frequently making wide detours in order to avoid obstacles which could not be surmounted. Deep gullies, the sides of which were too steep to be negotiated, impenetrable thickets of young trees and underbrush, rock walls in which a break had to be found, slopes covered with shale and weathered stone, all served to impede their progress. There was little conversation; the difficulties of the trail focussed the attention of each rider upon his mount: a careless step might bring about a catastrophe.

Mile upon mile of the arduous journey was covered, and afternoon found them amid the pines which clothed the lower slopes of the mountains. Winding in and out among the sentinel-like tree-trunks, and sheltered from the burning rays of the sun, both men and beasts experienced a welcome relief.

"Lordy, I hope we can find a shorter way back," Ridge remarked to Severn, who was riding with him. "These fellas shore picked a dandy hide-out."

"There's an easier trail, but it strikes the range a good few miles from yore place," the foreman told him. "Shadwell took us that way when he came to Hope at my invitation."

Ridge laughed. "He'll not be asked this time," he said meaningly. "We'll just hang him—good an' plenty—ourselves."

The Lazy M man smiled but said nothing; with Snap in the party he had his own opinion as to Shadwell's fate. Behind him he could hear the gunman's voice; he was talking to Big Boy.

"Yeah, I knowed Sudden, an' he was all they called him," he was saying. "Why, he could shoot quicker'n a man could count, an' his draw was an unholy merricle."

"Fella like that's a curse to the community," commented one of the younger X T men.

"Yo're speakin' outa turn, son," the gunman said. "A blessin' is what yu mean. Sudden never drewed but he had to, an' then—well, there was a scarcity o' skunks in that district."

Snap's voice had an acrid edge to it, and the youth who had invited the mild reproof was effectually silenced; the squint-eyed, leather-faced little stranger looked very capable of taking care of himself in any company.

Presently they emerged from the pines and forcing their way through a dense jungle of undergrowth which covered a long rise, found themselves on the rim-rock of a small basin. In front of them the ground dropped sharply down through a belt of scrub to a hollow of rich grass, in the centre of which, gleaming like a gem in the sunlight, was a pool of water. On the other side the grass sloped gently up to an almost vertical wall of stone, bare of vegetation, ribbed and weather-stained, which, from where they stood, seemed to rise almost unbroken to where it terminated in one of the storm-scarred peaks which gave the range its name. Around the water cattle and horses were grazing, and about eighty feet up the cliff face was the ledge leading to the caves. Far above, against the azure sky, an eagle winged its majestic way.

"Shore, looks peaceful, don't it?" Ridge remarked. "I'll bet them cattle ain't wearin' their lawful labels."

"Diggin' the devils out ain't goin' to be as easy as pullin' a cork," the foreman said. "There may be another way into the caves, but the on'y one I know of is along the face o' the cliff, an' one man on the ledge could hold it against

a score. My idea is this: me an' two-three others will try for the pathway an' the rest'll line up in the brush this side o' the valley an' cōver us, droppin' any guy who comes out o' the caves; the range ain't more'n seven hundred."

No one had a better suggestion to offer, and Severn, with Snap, Gentle, and Big Boy—who pleaded a personal debt to pay—rode for the entrance to the valley. Keeping closely under cover, they presently came to the opening through which Severn had been taken before; it was unguarded, and having hidden their mounts they passed through. In the corral they found several horses and turned them loose. Hardly had they commenced the climb up the cliff when two shots rang out in quick succession; they did not come from across the basin.

"That was a warning—they got a lookout posted somewhere," the foreman said.

Evidently the alarm had brought men out of the caves, for puffs of smoke and sharp reports echoed from the other side of the valley; Ridge and his men were getting into the game. The ascent of the path now became a perilous project, for in places where the cliff bulged the climbers were exposed to fire from the ledge above. The bandits were well aware of this, and two of them, lying prone on the ground, waited with levelled guns for the appearance of the attackers.

"Hug the wall, boys, an' jump lively round these dam curves," were the leader's orders.

"Wish I'd stopped growin' sooner," Big Boy lamented. "Durn it, why warn't I born a lizard?"

"Yu was, but they give yu a man's body by mistake," Gentle assured him. "Git a move on, it's as hot as the hinges o' hell. If them fellas do knock a chunk or two off'n yu there'll be enough left—to cover me."

"Well, if yu ain't a perfect—lady," said Big Boy. "If I git hit, I hope the bullet bores yu 'too."

"Shucks, they ain't got a cannon," grinned Gentle.

With their backs to the rock face, a yard at a time, they crept slowly up the footway, bullets whistling past their ears

as they dodged round the dangerous bends. The last of these was only a matter of twenty yards from the cave, and here they paused, panting, to deliberate. The firing from across the valley had now died away, as though the marksmen had realised the futility of trying to hit the flattened figures of the defenders. Peeping round the shoulder of rock which sheltered them the foreman saw one of the bandits at the top of the pathway cautiously rise to his feet. Instantly, away off in the scrub a rifle spoke, and the man, dropping his own weapon, flung up his arms, staggered, and pitched headlong over the precipice. Severn seized the opportunity.

"Come ahead, boys," he cried. "There's on'y one now."

With the words he dashed round the corner and the others followed. The solitary defender, taken by surprise, fired one wild shot, scrambled upright and ran for the cave, only to drop, a huddled heap, at the entrance. A shout from behind made the foreman turn, and he saw Ridge, with some more of the men, climbing the pathway. Keeping well to the side of the ledge, he waited for the reinforcement. The entrance to the Cavern, black and forbidding, had yet to be negotiated.

"Thought we'd be more use up here," Ridge panted, as he and his men reached the top. "What's the next move?"

Severn pointed to the opening. "We gotta rush it," he said. "Risky, o' course, but there's no other way."

Bunching together as much out of sight as possible, they edged up to the opening, dashed in and flung themselves flat on the floor. Shafts of flame split the darkness ahead of them and bullets hummed over their heads, but owing to Severn's ruse there were no casualties. Lying prone in the shadows, the attackers returned the fire, aiming at the flashes, and the walls of the cave re-echoed the reports. There was the acrid smell of burnt powder and the blue smoke whirled through the opening behind them. How many of the bandits were opposing them the besiegers had no means of telling, but that they were falling back or suffering loss was soon

shown by the slackening of the firing. Severn whispered an order; and his men rose and rushed forward.

Out of the gloom came spits of fire, and by the momentary light they saw white-swathed faces at which they shot. One of the X T men dropped, and Severn stumbled over a man's body just as a gun barked in his face. Clutching as he fell, he caught the other round the middle and they went down together. The foreman felt two claw-like hands gripping his throat and struck violently with the barrel of his revolver. He heard the thud of steel upon bone, a groan, and the choking grip fell away. He staggered to his feet to find that someone had discovered a lantern and that the fight was over. Several of the cowboys had been hit, but none seriously. Two of the bandits lay dead on the ground, another—Severn's late opponent—was still unconscious; the rest had vanished.

"Get more lights an' search every hole," the foreman ordered. "There must be another way outa this damn warren."

Snap Lunt had also disappeared. At the first gleam of the lantern he had glimpsed a shadow melting into the dark depths of the cavern and had gone in pursuit. Stumbling along what appeared to be a tunnel, he saw a line of light and, feeling above it, discovered a door. It was not fastened, and pushing it ajar he saw a small room, hollowed out of the living rock. On a home-made table in the centre a candle was burning, and by a pallet-bed a man stooped, hurriedly putting together a pack. Snap's eyes gleamed as he stepped noiselessly in, closed the door, and then chuckled aloud. The man's head jerked round, his eyes widened and his jaw dropped; he might have been looking at a ghost.

"Snap?" he gasped.

"Shore thing—the same old Snap," the gunman grated. "Don't bother about yore pack, Shady; yu won't need it where yo're goin'."

The ruffian gaped, terror patent in his eyes, at this peril from the past which had so suddenly confronted him. Well he knew the lightning speed of those two hands hovering

over the gun butts, and he mentally cursed himself for having delayed his flight for the sake of his ill-gotten gains. Much good they would be to him now this diminutive devil, with the squinting, venomous eyes, had found him again. One man only in the whole world did he fear and this man was before him; a quick death was the most mercy he could expect. In sudden desperation he swept the candle from the table and jumped aside. Out of the dark came Snap's jeering voice:

"Panicky, eh, Shady? Well, it gives yu a better chance but it won't save yu. Tell me where the girl is an' mebbe I'll let yu go—this time."

"I'll see yu in hell," came the answer.

"Yeah, but yu'll have to wait for me," Lunt laughed.

The outlaw did not reply, fearing his voice might betray his location, and for a few moments the silence was unbroken. There, in the utter blackness, the two men waited, each intent on the other's life. Both were experienced gun-fighters, and both knew that the slightest slip would mean death. Shadwell stood motionless, half-crouching, his gun levelled from the hip, waiting, listening. Presently he heard a faint sound as of a boot-heel crushing a fragment of rock and strained his ears in the endeavour to place it. Again it reached him and the thought that his enemy was creeping up made him shiver. Certain that he knew the direction, he fired. The flash showed that he had guessed wrongly—the grinning, vengeful face of the cowboy was well to the left of the spot he had aimed at. Ere he could pull the trigger again a spurt of flame stabbed the darkness and his left arm dropped, numbed and useless to his side. The pain of the wound wrenched a groan from his lips.

"Got yore left wing, eh, Shady?" came the mocking voice. "It'll be yore right next, and then——"

The wounded man fired wildly at the sound and flung himself sideways, but no answering bullet came. Had he made a lucky hit? Breathlessly he waited, cowering against the wall of the cave. His damaged arm throbbed with pain

and he could feel the warm blood trickling down. There was a shuffling of feet outside the door, and a voice called :

"Hey, stranger, yu in there?"

"Yeah. Go away—I'm busy," Lunt replied, and Shadwell shivered, for the tones were not those of a stricken man.

He heard the departing footsteps of the man outside and they sounded like a death knell; Lunt must be very sure. Again the nerve-wracking silence endured and was becoming unbearable when the cowboy spoke :

"Listen, Shady, I'm agoin' to give yu a chance, which is more'n yu gave Rafe Sanders," he said. "I've found the candle; when I've lighted it, we both go for our guns. What yu say?"

"Good 'nuff," croaked the other, trying to keep the exultation out of his voice.

He heard Lunt fumbling about, saw the splutter of the match, and forthwith fired. But the match did not waver, a streak of flame spouted from the gunman's right hip, and the bandit crashed forward with a bullet in his brain. For Shadwell's cunning had not been equal to that of his opponent. Prepared to cheat, he had reasoned that Snap would strike the match with his right hand, so he aimed to the left of the flame. But Lunt had guarded against treachery by snapping the match alight with his left thumbnail well away from his body, the gun in his right ready to shoot. Shadwell had been outplayed and he had paid the penalty. The little gunman lighted the candle and looked contemptuously at the man he had slain.

"Crooked to the end, like I knowed he'd be," he commented. "Well, it's been comin' to yu a long time, Shady."

Having made sure that the man was dead, Snap went in search of his companions. He found Severn and the owner of the X T at the entrance to the Cavern interrogating the man who had been stunned. He was a surly-looking ruffian and sullenly refused to give any information.

"Dunno what yo're yappin' about," he said, for the fifth or sixth time.

Severn turned away. "If he won't talk, string him up, Ridge," he said shortly. "We got no time to waste on fools."

The possibility of anything but death had apparently not occurred to the captive, but at the foreman's words he looked up.

"What was yu askin'?" he growled.

"Where is Miss Masters?" Severn said. "An' come clean, or yu'll die so quick hell won't be ready for yu."

"There was a gal here but they took her on to the other cache," the fellow replied.

"Where's that?" snapped the foreman.

"I dunno—never bin there," the prisoner returned. "I ain't throwed in with this crush long an' wish I'd never seen 'em."

"Who was the boss o' this outfit?" was the next question.

"Can't say. We took orders from a square-set chap by name o' Shadwell," the man answered. "None of us knew the others well 'cause mostly we had our mugs draped."

Somehow Severn believed that the outlaw was telling the truth. "Yu can take a hoss an' some grub an' beat it outa the country," he told him. "An' if yu got any regard for yore health, don't dawdle." The man slouched away and Severn turned to Ridge just as Lunt came up. "Some of 'em musta got clear—there's a passage out to a ledge higher up the rock face. I'm thinkin' that hombre gave us the straight goods—the girl ain't here."

"Pity we missed that fella Shadwell," Ridge regretted.

"We didn't," Snap said grimly, and passed on.

Ridge's glance followed him. "Don't waste no words, does he?" was his remark. "An' I'm willin' to bet he don't waste no cartridges neither."

"Yu'd win," Severn smiled. "Point is, what we goin' to do now?"

"Leave a couple o' chaps to search out this other cache

an' hike home," Ridge replied. "Nothin' else to do—yet."

Severn agreed. "One cowboy from each outfit remained behind with instructions to comb the country and send word immediately they hit upon the second hide-out. The rest returned to their respective ranches.

CHAPTER XVII

THE daylight raid on the Lazy M ranch and the carrying off of its young mistress, coming so soon after the impudent despoiling of the bank, aroused a wave of indignation in Hope, the universal opinion being that it was quite time the bandits were vigorously dealt with. But when the news came that this had been attempted, some of the inhabitants found offence in that. This singular point of view originated with the sheriff and was carefully fostered by him. He affected to regard the joint action of the two ranches as a direct slight, not only to himself and his office, but to the whole settlement.

"What's the good o' the law?" he asked almost plaintively, in the "Come Again."

"Search me," interjected a wit.

"With folks takin' on jobs theirselves," continued Tyler, ignoring the interrupter. "Now yu put anythin' in my hands an'——"

"It'll git dirty, Hen, yu bein' what I call a seldom soap-user," the same speaker finished for him, and the crowd laughed.

"Allasame, the sheriff's right," one of them admitted. "It was his job an' he oughta bin given a chanct."

"An' look what's happened," continued the officer, heartened by the support. "They ain't brought the gal back an' some o' them scallywags got clear away. I'd 'a' cleaned 'em up right."

"Like yu did when they busted the bank," said the scoffer.

The sheriff made no attempt to reply; he was satisfied.

He had vindicated himself and put the Lazy M and X T in the wrong in the minds of some of the townsfolk, thereby carrying out the orders he had received from Bartholomew. So that his face wore a smug, satisfied expression when he called at the Bar B the following morning. The big man's welcome was not flattering; he had a wholesome contempt for men who allowed him to use them, and did not always trouble to hide it.

"Yo're lookin' pretty pleased with yoreself this mornin'," he sneered. "What's the glad tidin's?"

"I put a crimp in Mister Severn," the sheriff gloated. "If he's expectin' a pat on the back for tacklin' them outlaws he's due for a disappointment, yu betcha."

"Fine," gibed the other. "That'll scare him most to death, o' course. What do yu reckon he'll do—leave the country?"

The bitter sarcastic tone and the scornful eyes told Tyler that he was being ridiculed, and the complacency vanished from his face as though wiped away with a sponge. He wriggled uncomfortably in his seat and did not reply. Having thus reduced him to the state of mind he required, Bartholomew delivered the next blow.

"Yo're a middlin' pore sheriff, ain't yu?" he began. "How long d'yu reckon yu'd keep yore job if I wasn't back o' yu?"

The visitor's puffy, crimson face took on a purplish tint at this home question.

"I know yu bin a good friend, Bart," he quavered. "I never forget it."

"Yu better not," Bart told him grimly. "I'm about the on'y one yu got. When yu goin' to arrest Severn?"

"Arrest him?" goggled Tyler. "Whaffor?"

"Pickin' flowers outa yore front garden, o' course," the big man said with savage irony. "For the murder o' Philip Masters, to begin with."

"But I ain't got a shred o' evidence," the officer protested.

"No, bein' sheriff, yu wouldn't have—others has to do yore job for yu." Bart retorted. "But yu needn't to worry about that; I've got a-plenty."

"Yu can prove he bumped off Masters?" gasped the astounded sheriff.

Bart nodded triumphantly. "He's as good as hanged," he said. "Climb yore cayuse an' I'll show yu."

Half an hour later they rode into The Sink and turned up the little gully where Bartholomew had happened upon the clothes of the missing rancher. When they reached the bush which concealed the hiding-place, the Bar B man pointed to it, and said:

"Take a peep for yoreself."

Thrusting aside the foliage the sheriff pulled out the wrinkled garments one by one, examining them closely. When he came to the hat his pig-like eyes widened.

"That's Masters' lid, shore enough—they must be his duds," he said. "Hello, what's this?"

Underneath the clothes, and half-hidden at the bottom of the crack was a gleam of metal. The sheriff reached down and lifted the object into view—a Winchester repeater. The barrel of the weapon was foul, not having been cleaned since last fired, and on the stock the initials "J.S." were rudely scratched. At sight of these Tyler emitted a whoop of exultation.

"Them letters stands for Jim Severn, I reckon," he pronounced, with the air of one who has worked out a difficult problem.

"What a head yu got, Hen," Bart said, in anything but an admiring tone. "Allasame, it's possible they might mean John Smith."

The sheriff looked at him doubtfully. "Yu think it's his gun?" he asked.

"I know it is, yu fool," Bart assured him, and at his meaning look Tyler grinned with understanding. "Now, see here," the rancher continued, "put them things back as they was, I didn't find 'em, remember. Yu an' one o' yore

deppities, ridin' through here, will notice the tracks, foller 'em up an' discover the duds. Savvy ? ”

The sheriff did, plainly enough, and his evil little eyes glittered at the prospect of besting the man who had scorned and shamed him and at the same time covering himself with glory. This would show some of those cheap-wits in Hope what sort of a sheriff they had. He well knew that his reputation badly needed a tonic, and here it was, “made and provided,” like the statutes.

“Yu shorely have got brains, Bart,” he said admiringly, as he replaced the articles. “Wonder where he hid the body ? ”

“Ask the buzzards ; why d’yu reckon he stripped it ? ”

“That’s so—no one can’t identify bones. He ain’t as smart as I thought or he’d ‘a’ burned the things.”

“He’d figure ‘em safe here, an’ they would ‘a’ been on’y I noticed the tracks an’ got curious ; a chance in ten thousand.”

As they turned their horses’ heads again towards the Bar B Tyler asked, “Anythin’ else to tell me ‘bout Severn ? ”

“Yu can charge him with the bank robbery an’ shootin’ Rapson,” Bartholomew replied coolly, and the sheriff fairly jumped in his saddle.

“Yu can prove that, too ? ” he cried incredulously.

“There’ll be no need—he’ll do that for yu hisself,” the rancher told him.

“But I thought——” began the bewildered officer.

“Great mistake. Fella like yu shouldn’t think—too big a strain on your intellects,” sneered Bart. “Lemme do it for yu, Hen ; yu’ll find it safer.”

The sheriff subsided like a burst bladder. He was well aware that he was wholly at the mercy of this jeering devil, and must obey blindly, for though he knew a little, and suspected much, Bart had never admitted him to his confidence. He was a mere tool, to be used, rewarded or discarded at his master’s whim.

"Whyfor did Severn want to abolish Masters?" he ventured.

"I figure him an' Embley are after the 'Lazy M,'" Bartholomew explained. "An' with the girl outa the way, there don't seem to be much to stop 'em—barrin' me."

"But the White Masks took the gal an' he tried to git her back," Tyler argued.

"Men wearin' white masks, yu mean, same as when the bank was looted," the other corrected. "First off, I thought he was in with the Pinnacles' gang, but I can see now he's just used 'em. They didn't find the girl, did they? Oh, he's clever, damn him."

"What d'yu reckon they done with her?"

"Planted her, likely as not," lied the Bar B owner. "With no heirs—I never heard Masters mention any family—an' Embley executor o' the will, why, it's pie like mother used to make."

"The Judge has a name for bein' straight," Tyler offered.

"The cleverest crook allus has," was Bart's caustic comment.

When they parted at the Bar B ranch-house, the owner had a final word:

"I hear Rapson is better an' is startin' up his bank again. Keep an eye on it; I've a hunch yu'll get yore chance there. Have a coupla yore men allus handy, but don't move till Severn gives yu the invite. I gotta take a little trip an' I'm leavin' this to yu. Bungle it, an' yu an' me take different trails. Savvy?"

The sheriff nodded and went away, the big man's eyes following him contemptuously.

"If I'd 'a' told him it was sudden he'd gotta arrest he'd be p'intin' for Mexico right now," he soliloquised.

"An' I dunno as I'd blame him much at that," said another voice, and Bartholomew turned to find his foreman.

"Hello, Pent," he greeted. "How'd it go?"

"Easy as takin' a drink," replied Penton. "No trouble a-tall. Yu got the sheriff primed up?"

"Shore, but hang around town in case he wants help," Bart said. "Things is shapin' up right for us, an' I don't want any fool blunders."

* * * * *

In a rude but strongly-built log shack, hidden in a clump of wind-whipped, stunted pines on the slope of the second Pinnacle, was Phil Masters. From the moment when, in the hallway at the Lazy M, masked men had flung a blanket over her head, carried her out and tied her on the back of a horse, her mind had been in a state of numbed bewilderment. She was conscious of having been jolted about like a helpless sack on the back of a pony through an interminable ride. After the first hour the stifling blanket which muffled her head had been removed and she was able to breathe freely again and look about.

There were four men with her, two riding in front and two behind, well-armed, dressed in ragged range costume and masked. The towering peak far ahead told her that they were pointing for the mysterious region she had once expressed a desire to explore. But the fulfilment of her wish brought no satisfaction; the great, bare rock gulches, the dark, dank woods, and the deep silence produced a sense of hidden menace in her mind; in such surroundings, perhaps, her father had been murdered. Her escort took no notice of her, and, if they spoke, did so in whispers she could not hear; it was like riding with the dumb.

Hour after hour they plodded on, and at last, when they were beneath the shadow of the first Pinnacle, a halt was called. The men got down, lifted Phil from her saddle, and the journey was continued on foot up a narrow cliff pathway. She had guessed, of course, that she was in the hands of the dreaded White Masks, and she now recognised the place from the description Larry had given her. As she toiled up the steep slope she found herself wondering if Severn would come to her rescue.

— She spent a sleepless night sitting on a blanket in a black

hole adjoining the main cave. In the morning one of her captors brought bread, bacon and coffee.

"We start in half an hour," he said gruffly.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, but got no answer.

The hot, strong liquid put a little heart into her, but she could not touch the food. Presently the fellow returned and, taking the lantern he had left, motioned her to follow him. Passing through a long, dark tunnel, they climbed a flight of rude steps. Here another man was waiting and, despite her protests, they fastened her wrists together and tied a handkerchief over her eyes. Then came a repetition of the previous day's discomfort. Unable to see the trail ahead, she was entirely at the mercy of her mount, and was jerked and bumped about in the saddle until every bone in her body ached. She had no conception as to where she was being conducted, but she guessed they were still in the mountains, because of the keenness of the morning air and the fact that every slope they descended was followed by a corresponding rise. Greatly to her relief the journey proved shorter than that of the day before. It ended at the hut in the pines.

An examination of her prison promised little prospect of escape. The walls of stout, untrimmed logs, embedded in a floor of tightly-packed earth, and a massive door secured by a heavy padlock, made the place ideal for the purpose to which it was being put. A mere hole a foot square admitted light and air; from it the prisoner could see only a gloomy curtain of pine branches. The furniture consisted of a pile of spruce tops covered by a dubious blanket, a bench, and a table constructed out of a packing-case which had once contained tinned goods. Phil shuddered as she remembered her own trim little bedroom at the Lazy M. A clang of metal at the door warned her that someone was coming in, and she seated herself on the bench and prepared to present as brave a front as possible. The man who entered was not one of the four who had captured her; he was taller and of slighter build. He did not trouble to remove his slouched hat, and

through the slits in his mask she saw ruthless, covetous eyes devouring her.

"Prettier piece than I thought yu was," he said suddenly, and the girl's cheeks flamed at the insolence in his tone. He studied her again for some moments, and then asked, "Know where you are?" When she shook her head, he added, "Well, I ain't tellin' but yu can gamble no one won't find yu, neither yore outfit nor that false-alarm sheriff they got in Hope."

"Why have I been brought here?" the girl demanded, trying to hide the tremor in her voice.

"Yu'll know that—later," he replied. "All I'm agoin' to say now is that yu got one chance, an' on'y one. There's a visitor comin' to see yu an' he'll put up a proposition. Agree to that an' yu go free."

"And if I refuse?" Phil inquired, and saw a hateful gleam in his eyes.

"I'm shore hopin' yu will," he chuckled, "for then me an' the boys will have to draw lots to see which of us yu come an' keep house for—first."

The blood drained from her face as she realised his meaning.

"You—cowards!" she breathed.

"Best go light on the language," he warned. "An' see here, keep away from that winder; it's most all I can do to hold the boys in now. Pretty gals is scarce around thisyer neck o' the woods."

"When is this—visitor—coming?" she asked.

"Oh, he'll be along," the man replied casually, and went out, leaving her a prey to emotions in which fear predominated.

Mingled with it was curiosity as to the identity of the "visitor." This, she decided, must be Severn. All the doubts Bartholomew had instilled came back, and, added to what she herself had discovered, almost convinced her that the foreman, scheming to obtain the Lazy M, was coming to bargain with her. Bitterly she regretted her break with the Bar B owner. Her chief remaining doubt

centred about Larry; she could not bring herself to believe that he was in the plot against her.

Consumed with impatience, she disobeyed the injunction of the tall outlaw, and was often peeping out of the apology for a window. But only one man passed, a short, stoutish fellow, under whose pulled-down hat brim she could see a grey beard and the edge of a black patch which covered one eye. In a flash she remembered him as the pedestrian Bartholomew had savagely assaulted in Hope the morning she spoke so plainly. With hunched shoulders he slouched past, not even glancing towards the hut.

CHAPTER XVIII

SOLITARY confinement is the most dreaded of all prison punishments, and after forty-eight hours the girl's nerves were in a pitiable state. During that time she had seen only the man who brought her food, and from him she failed to extract a syllable. Then, on the third morning, when she had almost given up hope of the expected visitor, she heard footsteps and the welcome rattle of the padlock chain. The door opened, and she sprang up with outstretched hands; the man who stood there was Bartholomew.

"You?" she cried. "Oh, thank God! I was afraid it would be—someone else."

The big man looked down at her, an odd smile on his thin lips; this was a moment for which he had waited long. Perching himself on the makeshift table he rolled a cigarette.

"Lo, Phil," he said easily. "Pretty mess yu got yoreself into, eh, through trustin' strangers an' turning down old friends."

The girl flushed; she felt the rebuke was merited. "I can't understand it all," she said miserably.

"It's as plain as the biggest kind o' print an' just as I suspected an' warned yu first off," he replied. "Embley an' yore foreman mean to get the Lazy M. These scum here are in Severn's pay an' yu are his prisoner. What he's aimin' to do with yu, I dunno, but my idea is that they mean to force yu to marry that pup, Barton. That'll give 'em yore property, an' if an accident happens to yu——"

He broke off suggestively and the girl gazed at him with horror. "I can't believe that men could be so vile," she faltered.

— "Yu don't know 'em, Phil," he assured her. "Mebbe

it'll surprise yu to hear that Severn killed yore dad—it's been proved now—robbed the bank an' shot Rapson."

The girl wilted under the blow. She had long given up hope of seeing her father again, but to learn definitely that he had been wantonly slain was a severe shock.

"An' if I'm figurin' wrong," continued Bart, watching her narrowly, "what's Embley doin' in this camp?"

"Judge Embley—here?" she cried in amaze.

Bartholomew contented himself with a nod. Phil tried to think, to find some reason for the presence of her father's friend in this den of thieves, but she could not; the Bar B rancher must be right, she concluded.

"But you'll take me away, won't you?" she asked eagerly. "I'm afraid—horribly afraid."

The man's cunning eyes gleamed with satisfaction; this was the frame of mind he wanted her in.

"Can't say as I blame yu," he returned. "'Pears to me yu're at the mercy o' the scaliest lot o' scamps I ever clapped eyes on. As for gettin' yu away, that won't be easy; it'll depend on yu."

"On me?" she queried.

"Shore," Bartholomew smiled. "Yu see, it's like this, Phil. I once happened to save the neck o' the chap in charge o' this gang, an', strange to say, he's grateful. He knew I was interested in yu an' sent me word. Now, here's the point: these fellas are tough, but they ain't anxious to tangle with Black Bart. In other words, they won't interfere with anythin' or anybody *belongin'* to me. Savvy?"

"I'm afraid I don't," she said doubtfully.

"I'm proposin', Phil," he smiled. "Not, I reckon, in the way a girl likes to have it done, but yu gotta admit the position is a mite peculiar. On'y as my wife will these rogues let me take yu away. The Judge is here to tie the knot, an' if Severn's gaffblin' on makin' yu marry his side-kicker, won't it be a jar to find yu got a husband already, huh?"

Phil listened with a sinking heart. However guilty the

foreman and his friend might be, she did not want to wed Bartholomew. Yet there seemed to be nothing else to do, and the fearful future smirkingly promised her by the bandit leader if she refused this offer was ever present in her mind. Slumped against the wall of the hut she strove to compose her thoughts.

"The Judge may not be willing," she temporised.

"When I've had a talk with him, I figure he will be," Bart said grimly. "I know more'n he thinks."

The girl closed her eyes wearily, and in sheer desperation was about to consent when a sibilant whisper reached her ears

"He's lyin'. Don't give in; play for time."

Her start of surprise passed unnoticed by the rancher, who was awaiting her answer with a smile of expectant triumph. Though she had no idea who the mysterious adviser might be, she was ready to clutch at any hope, and the thought of a possible friend gave her courage.

"You must let me have time to consider," she said.

The big man's face darkened with disappointment. "We ain't got none to waste," he reminded her. "I took a big risk comin' here, an' to hang about is a bigger one. There's somethin' else I oughta told yu. 'Severn' ain't the real name o' yore foreman; he used to be pretty well knowed as 'Sudden.' Yu've heard o' him, I guess."

Her face blanched. Sudden, the outlaw! She remembered the tales told of his reckless courage, marvellous marksmanship, and the dexterity with which he time after time eluded capture. She did not know that, although ostensibly a hunted criminal, he was actually working on the side of the law, and that the crimes attributed to him were committed by others. Such a man as she conceived Sudden to be might be guilty of any outrage and would show no mercy.

"Well," Bartholomew said, "knowin' that, yu still wantin' time?"

"Don't weaken," came the warning whisper.

"Yes, I must think," Phil said faintly.

Bartholomew's patience was becoming exhausted; his

voice had a very palpable sneer in it as he retorted, "Oughtn't to need much thinkin' about—the choice o' leavin' herê as my wife or stayin' to be the playthin' o' these cow thieves." Instantly, by her expression, he saw that he had made a mistake, and hastened to mend it by adding, "I overheard some of 'em talkin'."

But the damage was done; the fact that he had used the same threat as the outlaw had engendered suspicion in the girl's mind, and Bart's explanation, quick and plausible as it was, did not remove it. So that it was with a frowning face and nothing settled that he left her, with the stated intention of interviewing the Judge.

"An' when I've fixed things with him yu'll have to make up yore mind, Phil," he warned. "I ain't goin' to be fooled with."

He went out and she heard the key grate in the lock. She had but one hope—the unknown whisperer. A scrutiny of the wall behind her showed that two of the logs did not quite meet, the space enabling the listener to hear and make himself heard. Was it the outlaw trying to trick her into throwing away her chance of escape? She did not think so; the voice had seemed agitated. She could not see through the crack, and, though she waited eagerly, the silence remained unbroken.

Bartholomew had not far to go, a mere twenty paces through the trees brought him to another hut, similar to the one he had just left. Inside this, lolling easily on a bench and puffing a cigarette, he found the Desert Edge jurist. For a moment the prisoner blinked in the sunlight which poured through the door, and then, recognising the visitor, greeted him sardonically.

"Mornin', Bartholomew, have they got you, too?" he asked. "Or are you the chief, by any chance, of this choice collection of gaol-fodder?"

"Wrong both guesses," replied the rancher.

"Ah, well, then I haven't to thank you for my arrival here?" Embley proceeded.

"No, but yu may have to for yore leavin'," Bart told him.

"And the price, Bartholomew?" the Judge queried, his glance measuring the man.

"A small service which'll cost yu nothing," was the reply.

"Humph!" commented the old man drily. "I think I'd rather pay cash. And the nature of this—service?"

"Just the marriage service," grinned Bart.

The Judge's eyes widened and he rose with alacrity. "Delighted," he said. "I believe matrimony to be the only risk you haven't indulged in. Does the ceremony take place at the Bar B?"

"No, here," the rancher replied.

"Well, why not," Embley said lightly. "A wedding and honeymoon in the mountains; most romantic. I must, however, know the lady's name and if she is willing."

"The girl is Phil Masters, an' she is willin'," Bartholomew bluntly told him.

The Judge sat down again. "Miss Masters here?" he said sternly. "What does this mean?"

"It means I'm wise to yore game, Embley, an' I'm goin' to beat it," the Bar B man replied. "Yu got hold o' Masters, framed-up his will, with yourself as executor, an' put yore man Severn in as foreman. Then Masters disappears an' yu got a free hand. The girl marries the fella you provide an' mebbe she disappears too, an' yu grab the Lazy M. Pretty sound scheme, I gotta hand it yu."

Embley stared at him in blank astonishment. "You have more imagination than I ever gave you credit for, Bartholomew," he said.

The big man took no notice. "The on'y mistake yu made, Judge, was not countin' me in," he continued. "Phil Masters has been promised to me for quite a piece, an' I'm goin' to have her. Yore consent 'pears to be necessary an' we figured the best way to get it was to have yu do the deed."

"So you sent your cut-throats to fetch me, huh?" Embley said.

"I don't own 'em—they was hired for the job," Bar explained, adding darkly: "But I reckon they'll do as I tell 'em."

The Judge replied that he hadn't a doubt of it, a remark which deepened the frown on the other's face.

"See here, Judge, there's no sense in travellin' six miles to cover one," he said. "I ain't unreasonable an' I'm makin' yu an offer. Marry me an' Phil, turn Severn down, an' I'll split the Lazy M three ways. What yu say?"

"That you are a precious Bascal," Embley answered.

"Yu refusin'?" snarled Bartholomew.

"Did my reply sound like an acceptance?" smiled the old man.

The rancher stood up, his face poisonous with passion, his hand gripping his gun.

"Yo're a damn fool," he cried. "What's to prevent me from blowin' yu apart right now?"

"Several things," laughed the lawyer. "In the first place, you wouldn't get that consent."

"Bah! Your successor——"

"Would be Governor Bleke, an old friend of mine, who would certainly carry out the instructions I have left," Embley stated coolly. "And he would ask questions, Bartholomew, questions you might find difficult to answer. In the second place, by killing me you put yourself in the power of these bandits—a very unwise thing to do; and, in the third place, Severn would shoot you down for the dog you are."

This time it was the Bar B man who laughed.

"He'll have to come back from over the Divide to do it," he jeered. "If the sheriff of Hope ain't lost his nerve, Mister Severn is sittin' in a cell about now."

The Judge stood up, the eyes beneath the bushy brows like chilled steel.

"On what charge?" he thundered.

"Just robbin' the bank an' shootin' Rapson, to say nothin' o' murderin' Masters," sneered Bartholomew. "He'll be

needin' yore professional services, if they ain't tried him a'ready."

"Utterly absurd," was the lawyer's comment.

"The evidence don't say so. It'll take a clever fella to get him clear; Tyler's got the deadwood on him, shore thing."

Embley looked at his informant and decided that, for once, the man was not lying. The news had perturbed him and he realised that he was powerless. Even if he gave in and married Bartholomew to the girl he knew he would not be released, and the signing of the certificate might even be his own death warrant—accidents could easily be engineered in the mountains. Bartholomew, guessing what was passing in his mind, tried again.

"Better reconsider that offer o' mine, Embley," he suggested. "It's yore on'y bet."

The Judge looked at him steadily. "Bartholomew, some day I shall sentence you to be hanged," he said.

The quiet conviction in the speaker's voice robbed the words of any semblance of threat, and, despite his hardihood, the rancher was conscious of a momentary chill; the only effect on his calloused nature was to make him more angry.

"I hold the cards, yu old mule," he said harshly. "I can keep yu here till yu rot." A sudden thought came to him. "Do yu realise what it will mean to the girl if yu don't marry us?"

"Yes," said Embley scornfully. "She will escape a life of misery and degradation."

Bartholomew laughed hideously. "Wrong—that's just what she'll get, for I'll let the White Masks have her," he jeered. "Sentence me to be hanged, eh? Well, yore pig-headed obstinacy will sentence her to somethin' a damn sight worse, an' yu can stick a pin in that."

The Judge looked at him with doathing.

"If anything were needed to clinch my decision, you've said it," he replied slowly. "Such a thing as you is a complete justification for men like Sudden; they do for the

community what the surgeon does for the human body—cut away poisonous growths.”

Hardened as he was, the bitter contempt in the old man's voice seared the rancher like one of his own branding irons. Purple with passion, he struck savagely, hurling his victim against the wall of the cabin, limp, his knees sagging, and the blood trickling down from his cut cheek.

“That's on'y a sample o' what yo're askin' for,” he sneered. “As for yore friend Sudden, or Severn, as he calls himself now, I've told yu a'ready he's got somethin' else to think of.”

“So you know that, do you ?” Embley rejoined. “Well, I don't think I'm a timid man, but in your shoes, Bartholomew, I'd be afraid. Sudden will get you.”

“Bah, yu can't scare me, old-timer,” Bart said, with a contemptuous laugh. “I've got him, an' where the hair's short, too. Likewise, I've got you. Toe the line, Embley, or I'll fix things so that hell will be a welcome change to yu.”

He went out, slamming and locking the door, leaving, though he did not know it, a well-nigh despairing prisoner. Embley had kept up a bold front and had no intention of giving in, but he could see no gleam of hope. Bartholomew was playing for a big stake, and he well knew the desperate character of the man. With Masters dead, Severn in custody, and the girl also in the hands of the bandits, the Bar Bowner did indeed, as he had boasted, hold all the cards.

CHAPTER XIX

THE Lazy M outfit was not in its customary happy frame of mind, for it was suffering from a sense of failure. A crushing blow had been administered to the bandits, but the chief object of the expedition had not been accomplished. The most disgruntled member was the man who had not been able to go. Larry, on his feet again but with one arm in a sling, had made the foreman's life a burden for the first twenty-four hours after the men returned.

"I tell yu we done all we could," Severn told him for about the fiftieth time. "What's the good o' yu walkin' about lookin' like a wet hen? Soon as we get word from Rayton, who knows the country an' is a good tracker, we'll hike up there an' fetch the girl home. I don't reckon they'll harm her none."

"Mebbe that'll be days," objected Larry. "I oughta go——"

"Yu ought—to blazes," his friend retorted. "Get Gentle to sing—that'll soothe yu. No, I ain't goin' there; I gotta ride to Hope, though I'm admittin' there ain't much difference, an' I don't want no lovesick cripples with me neither."

With which frank expression of his sentiments the foreman escaped, got his horse, and rode into town. It was early afternoon when he arrived and the street was empty. The sun was blazing overhead, and he was indulging in pleasant anticipation of a cooling drink at Bent's when he noticed that the bank was open again. Jumping down, he trailed the reins of his pony and walked in. The banker was there, looking weak and ill. He greeted Severn with a dubious sort of smile.

"Glad to see yu back, Mr. Rapson," said the foreman. "Settin' up yore game again, eh?"

"Yes, I am having another try," the banker said. "Folks here have been kind—they ain't blaming me. Mr. Bartholomew, for example, he paid in five thousand the day before the robbery and, rightly speaking, I owe him the money, but he won't claim—says he'll take his chance of the cash being recovered; others have followed his lead."

"Why, that's mighty generous," Severn allowed. "An' mighty clever," he added under his breath. They talked on different topics for a moment or two, and then Severn said, "I was wonderin' if yu'd mind breakin' these up for me. I got some small payments to make."

He produced four one-hundred-dollar bills and pushed them across the counter. Rapson glanced at them and shot a suspicious look at the unconscious cowman. His fingers were trembling as he picked up the notes.

"Certainly, Mr. Severn," he said huskily. "You don't mind if I send my clerk out on an errand first, do you?"

"No hurry," the foreman assured him and rolled a cigarette while the banker consulted a ledger and gave his assistant whispered instructions. When the youth had departed Rapson began to slowly count out smaller notes.

"Nervous as a cat," the customer reflected as he noted the way the man watched the door, and his shaking hands checking and re-checking the little pile of paper. "Well, yu can't wonder." Aloud he said: "Yu got any hope o' tracin' the stolen money?"

"I didn't have much until to-day, but I think now there's a chance," Rapson replied.

He spoke louder and much of his nervousness seemed to have vanished. Hearing footsteps, Severn turned and saw that the sheriff, with his two deputies, had entered the bank. Behind them, framed in the doorway, were several citizens, and others were arriving every moment. He scented trouble. All three officials had their hands in close proximity to their guns, and the expression of malignant triumph on the

sheriff's features was as plain as print. Twisting half round, so that he faced them, the foreman leaned against the counter, thumbs resting in his belt, and grinned genially.

"Step right up, sheriff, my business is about through," he said.

The officer eyed him malevolently. "Yore business ain't begun," he snarled. "Where'd yu git them notes yu just cashed?"

"Well, I dunno as it's any concern o' yores, but I got 'em here," Severn drawled.

Someone in the crowd behind sniggered and Tyler's face crimsoned. "I know damn well yu did, but mebbe yu won't find anythin' funny about it presently," he retorted.

"Yu got me guessin'," the puncher said. "Them notes are part o' the sum I drew out o' the bank the mornin' it was raided. Ain't that so, Rapson?"

The banker shook his head. "Those four notes you handed me just now were part of the stolen money," he stated.

A buzz of interest came from the onlookers, some of whom had now invaded the floor space of the bank. Severn stared at the man of figures in blank amazement; then his eyes chilled, and in a low, even tone, he said:

"I'm supposin' yu've made a mistake, seh."

The banker sensed the menace, but, though his face was deathly white and his lips trembled, he answered without hesitation.

"There can be no mistake. Here is a list of the numbers of the larger notes taken and I gave the sheriff a copy of it after the robbery. You can see for yourself."

He held out the list and the notes. Severn compared them and nodded; the numbers of the notes he had cashed were undoubtedly there. The banker flapped open a book, took a slip of paper and wrote rapidly. When he had finished he passed over the slip.

"There are the numbers of the notes I paid you," he said.

The foreman studied the list and knitted his brows in an effort to solve the mystery. How it had come about was more than he could fathom, but he recognised that the evidence was conclusive and that he was in a very tight corner. Slipping the list into his vest pocket he laughed and looked at Tyler.

"Yu honestly think if I'd got them notes the way yu say I'd be chump enough to try an' change 'em here?" he queried.

"Oh, the cleverest crook makes mistakes—that's how we catch 'em," Tyler bragged. "An' yu didn't know we'd got the numbers."

"Well, I dunno how yu did it, sheriff, but it shore looks a neat frame-up," Severn said. "I s'pose yo're goin' to charge me with helpin' to loot the bank?"

"Yu betcha—'mong other things. The shootin' o' Rapson for one," snapped the officer.

Severn's features expressed concern. "My gracious, did I shoot yu, Rapson? I'm right sorry."

"An' the murder o' Philip Masters," the sheriff added crushingly.

But the accused declined to be crushed; he only laughed. "Yore memory ain't what it oughta be, Tyler," he quizzed. "Yu've forgotten to put in the assassination o' President Lincoln."

"I dunno nothin'——" Tyler was beginning when Severn cut him short.

"Gentlemen, hush!" he said solemnly. "The sheriff has told the truth at last!"

Furious with rage at the laugh which this raised, Tyler started to pull his gun, remembered that this man had easily beaten Bart to the draw, and thought better of it. But his movement did not pass unnoticed.

"If yo're wantin' a pack o' cards I'll get 'em, Hen," came a sarcastic voice from behind.

The badgered officer darted an angry glance in the direction of the speaker. "I can do without a pack o' fools any-

way," he snorted, and, turning to his two men, he added, "Take his guns."

Neither of the deputies betrayed any great eagerness for the task and the puncher smiled.

"Better go slow, sheriff," he warned. "I'm a peaceable man up to a point, an' I got every respect for the law—for the law, I said, sheriff, not for the pin-eyed parasites who sometimes misrepresent it—but I don't like bein' rushed."

"Huh! if I say the word, we can blow yu apart," the officer blustered.

Severn did not seem to change his lolling attitude, yet with a motion that baffled the sight his guns were out levelled from the hips.

"Give yore orders, Tyler—to the undertaker," he mocked.

The blood fled from the sheriff's face and the crowd surged back towards the door, as eager to get out as it had been to enter; the bank had not been built for gun-fights. The man with the drop watched with saturnine amusement.

"No need for panic, gents," he said. "The sheriff an' his deppities will elevate their paws an' hear what I've to say." The command was obeyed without hesitation.

"Yo're resistin' arrest—that constitutes another charge," Tyler protested.

"Well, yu can't hang me but once, which is a consolation when yu come to think of it," the puncher grinned. "An' I ain't resistin' anyways, but I gotta little matter to arrange before I accept yore kind invite, sheriff. Yu see, there's no-one in charge at the Lazy M an' the boys are liable to paint for war when they hear about this. I want someone to take 'em word from me that they ain't to sit in, an' Judge Embley, at Desert Edge, has to be told; he'll know what to do."

There was a movement near the door and Snap Lunt pushed his way unceremoniously through the onlookers. His face betrayed no recognition of the Lazy M foreman.

"I'll take them messages, Mister," he offered. "I was agoin' to Desert Edge anyhow."

"I'm certainly obliged to yu," Severn said gravely.

"Here, I reckon I got a word to say 'bout* this," the sheriff interposed.

Lunt looked at him with narrowed eyes. "Yu claimin' to interfere with my movements?" he asked acidly.

Tyler had nothing to say to this challenge and with a gesture of contempt the little gunman headed for the door. He had almost reached it when a foot scraped. Instantly Snap sprang, turning in the air, and when he landed on his feet again he was facing the sheriff, with both guns out and venom in his slitted eyes. A few seconds of blood-chilling silence and then Snap realised that no sinister move was intended; his leathery features wrinkled into a hard grin.

"Sorry, folks," he apologised. "My nerves ain't just right these days."

After he had backed through the door and vanished the sheriff gave vent to an audible sigh of relief. One of the deputies expressed the general feeling.

"He oughta get them nerves seen to," he said. "I'm hopin' he finds the air o' Desert Edge suits his complaint; foolin' with him's 'bout as safe as treadin' on a rattler's tail."

"He'll find thisyer town too hot if he comes any more o' them capers," Tyler growled, his courage returning when the danger was over. "Now, Severn, what's the word?"

The cow-puncher unbuckled his gun-belt and held it out. "Havin' made my arrangements I'm entirely at yore service, sheriff," he mocked. "Yu got the wrong man, but a trifle like that won't worry yu, I'm shore."

The officer did not reply to the insult; this tame surrender of a man he regarded as desperate and dangerous made him uneasy. He felt, too, that he had presented a poor figure, the jeering indifference of the prisoner having robbed him of a spectacular triumph. Only when Severn, his hands tied with a strip of rawhide, was safely under lock and key did his captor begin to recover his self-esteem.

CHAPTER XX

HOPE AGAIN not being sufficiently civilised to boast of a regular gaol, offenders against the law had to be content with a cell, specially constructed for the purpose at the back of the sheriff's quarters. The walls were of 'dobe, two feet thick with a core of stout logs, light and ventilation being provided by an unglazed opening a foot square defended by a strong iron bar. This last must have been added for effect, since only a small child could have passed through the aperture. The door was massive, and secured by a heavy lock. A round hole in the upper part enabled the inmate of the cell to be spied upon. A pallet bed and a bench comprised the furniture.

Severn, having noted these details, rolled a cigarette as well as his bound wrists permitted, lighted it, and gave himself up to meditation. Jaunty as he had shown himself in the presence of the sheriff, he was well aware that his position was anything but a pleasant one. The finding of the stolen notes in his possession would be a sufficient proof for most men.

"I'll begin to believe I did rob the durn bank presently," he muttered.

Painstakingly he turned the matter over in his mind, seeking for some clue that might provide an explanation, and suddenly it came to him. When the bandits had raided the Lazy M and stolen the girl, the money had not been taken, though it was in a place where the most casual search must have unearthed it. At the time it had struck him as curious that such men should forego an opportunity for plunder.

"They rung the changes on me," he soliloquised. "Took my notes an' left stolen ones in their place. But why?

Shadwell might a'done it outa spite, but he warn't the sort o' man to pass up most of two thousand plunks, an' it wouldn't be his way o' evenin' up."

Though he was satisfied that he had solved the mystery of how the stolen money had come into his possession, he could see no way of proving it, and as many of the inhabitants of Hope had suffered by the bank robbery, he knew his chances of clearing himself were slim indeed. So far as the murder charge was concerned he did not give that much thought, regarding it as mainly a bluff on the part of Tyler. Nevertheless, he did not propose to remain idle; there was a certain evidence he hoped to be able to hand to Embley.

"I gotta get outa this," he muttered, and began to consider how that might be achieved.

Nothing could be done until his hands were free, and he strained at the thongs; they did not yield in the least. Then he tried the knots with his teeth, but the man who had tied them knew his job. An idea occurred to him. Going to the door, he yelled, and immediately one of the deputies appeared.

"What's yore trouble?" he growled.

"Thirst," replied the prisoner promptly. "This damned hole is like an oven."

"Yu can have some water," the fellow told him.

"Generous, ain't yu?" Severn sneered. "Aw right, but I don't want no thimbleful, neither. Bring a bucket—I'm as dry as a temperance talk."

The man grinned and went away, to return presently with a pail of water and a tin dipper, putting them down just inside the door.

"There yu are, an' don't make a beast o' yoreself," he said facetiously.

The prisoner did not reply to this pleasantry, but having made sure that the man was not watching him from the spy-hole, he took a drink, and kneeling down by the bucket, plunged his bound wrists into the water and kept them there. At the end of half an hour he had the satisfaction of finding

the rawhide give a little. Working at the bonds and renewing the soaking at intervals, he succeeded after some hours in stretching them sufficiently to slip them off when he wished.

Darkness was drawing on before he made his next move. Tyler, he surmised, would spend his evening, as usual, at the "Come Again"—he could vision him strutting about like a vain-glorious bantam—and the two deputies would be left in charge. As the dusk deepened he again began to shout through the door, and the man who had answered the previous summons showed himself.

"What yu belly-achin' about now?" he asked.

"Belly-achin' is right," Severn snorted. "Don't yu feed folks in thisyer sumptuous ho-tel?"

"Damme if I didn't forget about yu," the man chuckled. "See what I can do."

"So will I," murmured the prisoner, and smiled felinely as he slipped his hands free of the bonds.

The deputy returned soon with a hunk of meat and bread. Unlocking the door, he came in, put the provender on the floor and straightened up.

"Ain't got no cof——" he began.

Before he could finish, Severn leaped forward, his fist shot out and the guard went down under the bitter blow like a pole-axed steer. A few seconds sufficed to tie and gag him.

"Thank the Lord he was totin' his gun," murmured the captive, and making sure that it was loaded, slipped it into the band of his pants and buttoned his vest over it.

He listened at the door but heard nothing—the falling body on the earthen floor had made but little noise—and satisfied that all so far was well, he stepped lightly along the passage which led to the street. As he passed the half-open door of the sheriff's office, a voice called out:

"That yu, Jake? Where yu off to?"

"Back right away," Severn said gruffly.

"Huh! Hen's orders was to stay on the job," said the other.

"To hell with Hen," Severn grunted, edging nearer the exit. "He's stayin' on it hisself, ain't he?"

He did not hear the answer, for the street door was in front of him, and in a moment he was outside. Slouching his hat over his eyes, he slid round the corner of the first building he came to and picked his way along the backs of the others. It was darkish now, but there was a moon, and he had to slink quickly from shadow to shadow. Presently he reached the rear of Bent's saloon, and saw what he had hoped to find—the tethered horse he knew the owner usually kept there. He wondered whether Bent's friendship had been strong enough to survive the apparently conclusive evidence of his guilt. He believed it would be, but he dared not run the risk of making himself known.

"If he ain't changed, he won't mind my borrowin' the cayuse," he reasoned. "If he has, well, I ain't carin'."

Hauling in the picket-rope, he fashioned a hackamore, and without waiting to search for the saddle, mounted the animal and spurred for the nearest cover in the direction of the Bar B. He had but just ridden in among the trees when a confused medley of shouts from the buildings behind informed him that his escape had probably been discovered. No doubt the second guard, becoming uneasy at his companion's absence, had gone to make sure that all was well with their charge. Severn laughed aloud as he pictured the sheriff's face when he heard the news.

"He'll shore be mad enough to bite hisself," he told his horse.

Well aware that the regular trails would be searched, he took care to keep clear of the one to the Bar B, forcing his way through the brush and zigzagging along draws and gullies to avoid showing himself on the skyline. He did not trouble to hide his trail, knowing they could not track him in the night, even with the help of the moon. Beyond a general sense of direction he had nothing to guide him, and presently, without realising how he had come there, he found himself passing the ruined cabin of the nester Forby.

The big cottonwood, with the 4 B brand and the sinister row of notches, looked eerie in the moonbeams. The Lazy M man gave it but a glance, and was about to ride on when a horseman loped out of the trees and pulled up with an oath, only a few yards away. It was Penton, and at the sight of Severn, he snatched out his gun and covered him.

"Put 'em up, *pronto*," he ordered, and laughed in his throat when he saw that the other man was unarmed.

There was no choice; the desire to slay was patent in the fellow's eyes. Severn came to a desperate decision; as his hands went up, he drove his spurs home, and his horse with a scream of pain, reared and sprang full at the other rider. Penton fired, and the animal dropped with a bullet in its brain, while Severn, unable to leap clear, went with it. Breathless from the concussion, and with one leg pinned under the dead beast, the Lazy M man lay helpless. Penton climbed down and stood regarding him with a satanic grimace.

"I gotta allow yu ain't lost yore nerve, Mister Sudden," he said. "That trick would 'a'worked with some men." He twirled his gun carelessly by the trigger guard. "This is yore finish," he continued. "Bart wants to see yu danglin' from that tree, an' so do I. The on'y difference is he's hopin' to string yu up alive an' I ain't pertic'ler, so I'm goin' to shoot yu first. Anythin' to say?"

Severn looked at him coolly. "If I was on my feet an' had a gun, yu'd hunt yore hole, yu desert-rat!" he told him.

The man's narrowed eyes glared, his jaws worked with rage, and then he laughed.

"Mebbe I would," he said. "No, yu don't get out of it thataway, Mister man. Yo're my meat an' I ain't fightin' yu none whatever. I'm just goin' to kill yu—now."

His face twisted with malignant hate, he leaned forward and menaced the prostrate man with his gun, exulting in the power chance had given him, and hoping to detect fear in the eyes of his foe. But he saw only an expression of cold contempt, and in stark cruelty he struck savagely with his

left fist. The blow was his own undoing. With a low snarl, a long, lean, grey shadow shot across the open space and leapt for his throat. The force of the impact flung the man backwards to the ground. Severn seized his chance. With a desperate effort he freed himself and got shakily to his feet, just as Penton beat off the beast which had thrown him, and turned to finish his work. He found the conditions altered; Severn was erect, facing him with folded arms and a sneer on his lips.

"Penton, the tree is waiting for yu," he said.

Callous as he was, the threat chilled the man's spine, but he remembered that the speaker was weaponless, and with a laugh of scorn he raised his gun. He was actually pressing the trigger when Severn's hand flashed out, fire flamed from it, and Penton reeled and dropped. The grey shadow came up wagging a joyous tail.

"Quirt!" the foreman cried in amazement.

A glance at the huddled, twisted form on the ground told him that Penton was dead. He looked at the dog. "Yu shore do pay a debt, don't yu?" he said, and going to where the Bar B man's pony was standing, he lifted the rope from the saddle.

Ten minutes later he was on his way again. He had not gone far when he heard the sound of hoofs, and waited, gun drawn. He grinned and concealed it again when he saw the newcomer was Larry.

"How the hell——?" he began.

"Followed the dawg, yu chump," the young man explained impolitely. "Started for town to see yu, an' that four-legged flea-bag sneaked after—artful too, didn't show up till it was too late to take him back. When I got to Hope it was just a-hummin'. First fella I met told me yu'd skipped, an' how when Bart heard of it, he up an' told the sheriff just what he thought of him; it warn't really much but it took a long time, an' I should say that Hen is a well-informed man as regards himself now. Bart finished by saying that if yu ain't recaptured inside twelve hours, he'll

blow the sheriff into so many bits there won't be one big enough to pin a star on, which looks like he's irritated. They're offerin' five hundred bucks for yu, dead or alive."

"That's a right useful sum," the foreman said reflectively.

"Thinkin' o' earnin' it?" Larry quizzed.

"I might be," his friend replied. "Get on with yore recitation."

"Well, I'm ridin' past Bent's—past it, I said," he repeated as he saw the other's grin, "when Quirt goes off like Old Nick was after him. O' course I guessed he'd struck yore trail an' followed. Good thing yu wash sometimes, or the scent would 'a'been that strong I'd 'a'lost him."

"What yu want to see me for?" Severn asked, ignoring for the time the slur on his habits.

"Didn't want to see yu—had to," Larry smiled. "Snap's hoss bruk a leg on the way from Desert Edge, an' he had to hoof it. He was all in when he got to the ranch. I come in to tell yu the Judge ain't there. 'Pears that two-three nights ago, four fellas called to see him an' he rode away with 'em. Hard-looking lot, with their faces pretty well hidden, his landlady said; she didn't know 'em, but she fancied one o' the party had been there before. Embley ain't been heard of since."

This was bad news for the foreman, but he took the blow with his customary calm.

"So they've got him too," he said. "They ain't overlookin' no bets, I'm tellin' yu."

"Yu ain't tellin' me. Who is 'they' an' where have they got him?" Barton asked peevishly.

"'They' is the unknown quantity we're a-lookin' for, an' the Judge is in the Pinnacles with the girl," he was told.

The reminder that the actual whereabouts of his lady was yet to be discovered moved Larry to express himself. Severn regarded him sardonically.

"When yu've finished poisonin' the atmosphere, we'll push along," he suggested.

Larry subsided. "Where yu headin' for?" he asked.

The foreman told him, and the boy promptly swore again. "Yu must be loco," he said. "Don't yu know that hâlf the town is spraddled over the country searchin' for yu right now, an' yu make for the very place——"

"Where they wouldn't expect to find me," Severn finished. "Anyways, I'm goin'—I got business there."

"Yu got no business there, an' yu know it," grumbled the other. "Yore on'y business is to be punchin' the breeze for parts unknown. Like as not yu'll find Mister Penton at the Bar B, waitin' for yu with a gun in his paw."

"I guess not," his friend said. "Didn't yu come past the old shack?"

"Nope; heard yu an' took a short cut. Gawd knows yu was makin' noise enough," Larry accused. "What's the shack gotta do with it?"

Severn told him why Penton would not be at the Bar B to welcome them, and the boy's face hardened to granite as he listened. Then he looked at the dog trotting contentedly beside them, and it softened again.

"Good old Quirt," he said. "I take it back; yu ain't no flea-bag—yo're folks."

Half an hour later they halted in the brush fifty yards from the Bartholomew ranch. Telling his companion to stay there with the horses and to keep the dog quiet, Severn stole forward. No lights were showing, and as he cat-footed past the bunkhouse, no sound came from within.

"Pretty plain Bart ain't scared o' the White Masks," the intruder smiled to himself.

Though this was his first visit to the place, he guessed that the two windows in the front were probably those of the diving-room, and a glance through one of them told him he was right. Pushing up the sash, which was unfastened, he climbed in and looked round. At one side of the room was a writing-desk littered with books and papers. Hurriedly turning them over, he found what he was looking for—an old account book, one of the numbered pages of which was missing. He then tried the drawers of the desk,

and finding one fastened, forced it open with the blade of his knife, lately the property of Penton. Lying just inside the drawer as though it had been put there in haste, was a roll of notes. Severn snatched them out, and by the light of the moon was able to decipher the numbers; they were the ones he had received from Rapson when he withdrew the herd money.

"Yu certainly stacked the cards good, Mister Bartholomew, but the hand ain't played out yet," he soliloquised. "I'm bound to admit yu got somethin' besides sawdust in that ugly head o' yores."

Having methodically searched the rest of the drawers and found nothing of moment, he rejoined Larry, who was getting impatient.

"Ain't yu fetched the ranch with yu?" he asked. "Yu've been long enough to pack it up."

"Sunset, there's times when yu don't show no more sense than a sage-hen," the foreman reproved. "I got what I wanted, an' here it is."

He produced his plunder, and the boy's eyes opened as Severn explained their significance.

"That means Bart is in cahoots with the White Masks," he said.

"I was hopin' I wouldn't have to tell yu that," the elder man smiled.

"Aw right, Solomon, what's the next move?"

"Climb yore cayuse an' carry these things to Bent; he'll take care of 'em an' have 'em handy when they're wanted. Take Quirt with yu an' keep off the trails."

"What yu aimin' to do?"

"Go back to the sheriff, o' course, to claim that five hundred wheels."

Larry stared at him in doubt, which changed to blank astonishment when he saw that Severn was entirely serious.

"Yu *are* loco," he declared. "Plumb loco."

"I should be if I ran away," the other pointed out.

"Why, it would be twin-brother to ownin' up. Even yu oughta be able to see that."

Larry could see it, but he was not going to say so, and he knew that when Severn spoke in that tone it was useless for him to argue. He mounted, called the dog, and turned to depart.

"Yo're every sort of a damn fool, Don," he said. "They'll stretch yu, shore."

"Shucks, I'll dance at yore weddin' yet, yu red-faced little rooster," the foreman replied affectionately, and swinging his horse round, headed for town.

He took his time, for he had no desire to get back before the early morning, and it was necessary to avoid any zealous reward-hunters, for to be ignominiously conducted back to confinement was no part of his plan. So he ambled along by a circuitous route, and a golden glow was spreading in the sky behind the eastern range when he again sighted the unlovely, squalid huddle of huts which the optimists who dwelt there called "Hope."

Under cover of the brush, Severn dismounted, turned the horse's head in the direction of the Bar B, and gave it a vigorous smack on the rump; he knew the beast would drift homewards. He then threw pistol and knife into the undergrowth and made his way to the open street, stopping at the sheriff's quarters. Picking up a lump of rock he hammered upon the door.

"Hello, the house," he shouted.

There was no answer, and he repeated the summons, supplementing it with another tattoo on the woodwork. In the still air of the dawn the noise he made sounded prodigious, and it brought curious heads to windows and doors along the street. It also brought the sheriff. He had not yet slept off his overnight liquor, and stood staring in pop-eyed perplexity at his visitor.

"What yu want?" he asked stupidly.

"Why, to come in, o' course," Severn said, smiling easily. "I'm tired, an' bed listens good to me. Also five hundred

dollars. I can use that money. Have yu got it about yu, sheriff ? ”

“ No, I ain't, an' yu wouldn't git it if I had,” Tyler snapped, his muddled brain clearing a little.

By this time the buildings had vomited their occupants, and a goodly crowd of nondescriptly-attired onlookers had assembled to witness the unusual spectacle of a criminal clamouring to be reinstated in his cell. This was what the Lazy M man had played for. He promptly appealed to them.

“ What for sort of a town is this ? ” he asked grievously. “ It offers a reward for bringin' in Jim Severn, an' when I fill the bill an' fetch him in, the sheriff renigs. Ain't there no honesty in this burg ? ”

The twinkling eyes belied the indignant tone, and there was a burst of merriment from the mercurial citizens, several of whom advised Tyler to “ pay up an' look pleasant.”

“ But yu got clear,” the still puzzled officer burred.

“ Shorely yu didn't think I'd run away, did yu, sheriff ? ” the cow-puncher reproved. “ On'y guilty folks do that.”

“ Where yu been then ? ” Tyler queried.

“ Well, I'll tell yu,” grinned the prisoner. “ Yu see, that hole yu put me into ain't none too well ventilated—yu oughta see to that, sheriff, or yu'll lose custom—an' so I took a walk.”

The whimsical explanation, delivered in a drawling, nonchalant voice, tickled the onlookers. The amusement created apprised the sheriff that he was again being made a figure of fun, and as usual, it rendered him furious. Why the accused man had returned he did not know, but here he was, unarmed and helpless. By some miracle, he, Tyler, had been delivered from the wrath of Bartholomew. His bullying nature reasserted itself.

“ Took a walk, huh ? ” he sneered. “ Well, yu won't take another till yu go to the tree.”

“ Tried me a'ready, have yu ? ” Severn asked quietly.

With a gesture of rage, the sheriff turned to his two deputies, who had now appeared.

"Take him in an' tie his hands an' feet this time," he ordered. "If he gits away again I'll——"

"Yeah, Hen, yu'll do—what?" one of them enquired with deadly quietness.

The officer's face grew redder, he hesitated, and then, "Get deppities as can stay on their job," he answered.

The lame reply produced another snigger from someone in the crowd, and the officer beat a retreat, following his prisoner into the building.

"That fella's either loco or not guilty, an' he shore don't appear scatty," was one comment as the spectators dispersed.

Which was the impression the prisoner had aimed to create.

CHAPTER XXI

FOR hours after Bartholomew had left her, Phil sat motionless in dull despair, waiting fearfully for his return. Her world seemed to have tumbled about her, and she could see no gleam of hope. The prospect of marrying the Bar B owner was utterly hateful; even had there been no other reason—and her heart told her different—he had shown too plainly the manner of man he really was. Through the tiny window she watched the golden radiance of the sunset pale away in the sky, to be replaced by a velvety darkness which in turn gave way to the cold light of the moon. Only once was the silence disturbed, when the dull reports of two pistol-shots startled her.

The harsh grating of the padlock—a now unwelcome sound—reminded her that Bartholomew was coming back for her answer, and she stood up. But instead of the bulky frame she expected, she saw that her visitor was the little one-eyed, bearded stranger she had seen in Hope. He beckoned to her.

“C'mon,” he said hoarsely, but the girl shrank back.

“Where?” she asked nervously. “Is this a trap?”

“Shore it's a trap an' I'm takin' yu out of it,” he retorted. “Glad yu done what I whispered to yu through the logs there.”

“So it was you,” she breathed, still doubtful.

The man nodded, and noting that yet she hesitated, said quietly, “I'm takin' yu to a friend. If yu'd rather wait for Black Bart——”

“No, no, I'll come with you,” she replied hurriedly.

He led the way through the pines to another hut, very similar to the one they had left, and unlocking the door,

motioned her to enter. Standing facing the door, a look of grim expectancy on his face, was a man she recognised.

"Judge Embley!" she cried, and her hopes sank again, for she could not forget that this man was Severn's friend, and was, according to Bartholomew, in the plot against her. The Judge's expression changed when he saw who his visitor was.

"So it is you, and not that blackguard from the Bar B," he said. He looked at the one-eyed man. "What's the game, my friend?" he asked.

The man shrugged his shoulders. "No game, Judge," he replied. "I'm willin' to make a dicker with yu." Embley looked his question. "There's a fella here passin' in his checks." He paused as the other nodded understandingly. "No, I didn't shoot him," he continued. "He got his in that ruckus the other day with Severn an' his men at the Cavern. Well, he's somethin' on his mind an' wants to go out with a clean slate. If yu'll come an' write down his statement an' the young lady will witness it, I'll take the both o' yu away from here."

Embley considered only for a moment, and then, "Lead the way," he said.

They followed him out of the pines, across a bare plateau to where stood a larger cabin, sheltered by an overhanging shelf of rock. It consisted of two rooms, the second of which, from the piles of blankets, was evidently a sleeping apartment. On two of these piles men were lying, one silently and the other moaning feebly. It was to the latter that the one-eyed man conducted them. The Judge looked at the other bed.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"Oh, Slick, actin' boss o' this crew," was the reply. "He's just—sleepin'."

Despite the careless tone, the girl shivered; she remembered the shots she had heard. The still figure lying in the shadow looked unnatural, and she could detect no movement. The occupant of the second bed claimed her attention. By

the light of the lantern on an up-ended box, she could see that he was of a type common enough on the frontier, a man of middle-age, with coarse, brutal features now somewhat softened by suffering. His tanned, unshaven face seemed to have been drained of blood, and his eyes had sunk in their sockets. He coughed almost incessantly, and after each bout there was a stain of red on his lips.

"'Lo, Patch," he greeted feebly.

"'Lo, Mobey, how're yu makin' it?" asked the one-eyed man, and without waiting for a reply, continued, "I've fetched the Judge an' the young lady like I promised." He turned to the lawyer and whispered, "Better get busy; he's down to his last chip."

Embley took paper and pencil from his pocket and motioned the girl to listen. The sick man understood.

"I ain't got much time, Judge, an' I'm puttin' things plain," he began. "Yu'll remember the holdin' up o' the Desert Edge stage some years back, when Tug Satters, the driver, was killed?" The Judge nodded. "I was one o' the four what done it, an' I shot Satters," the other went on. "I didn't have no grudge agin him, but when we halted 'em, Tug dropped his lines an' reached back. I thought he was goin' for his gun, an' let drive. I figured after that he just forget to put his paws up an' was feelin' for his baccy, 'cause he hadn't got no gun. Well, I was sorry for Tug, but it was just a mistake, an' it ain't that I'm frettin' about. Here's the real reason I wanted yu, Judge; soon after the robbery I wrote out an' signed a paper sayin' the shootin' was did by another—a fella who warn't in the hold-up a-tall. I had to do it, Judge, or go to the pen myself for—somethin' else."

The weak voice faded out and a violent fit of coughing shook the man's frame; his fingers gripped the blanket until it seemed the bones must burst the sun-burned skin. When he could speak again it was little more than a whisper.

"The name—I had to put—in that lyin' paper was—Philip Masters," he said painfully.

"My father," the girl breathed.

The Judge waved her to silence. Bending forward he said, "And the man who made you write it was——?"

"Bartholomew, o' the Bar B!" the dying bandit gasped

Embley saw that the end was near. Hurriedly he read aloud what he had written, and held up by Patch, Mobey scrawled his name on the paper. He watched eagerly while the Judge and the girl did the like, and then with a sigh of content, dropped back.

"Bartholomew is——" he began, and said no more.

The lawyer drew the blanket over the face, folded up the paper and bestowed it in his pocket, and turned to the one-eyed man.

"What now?" he asked. "And how are we to name you, my friend?"

"Yu heard what he called me," the other replied with a jerk of his thumb towards the bed. "That name'll do as well as another."

The Judge glanced again curiously at the other occupied shakedown. "That man sleeps very soundly," he said.

"Yeah, Slick's a good sleeper," Patch replied indifferently, and then, "We gotta be movin'—the other four'll be showin' up any time now, an' they'd make trouble."

"The other four?" Embley queried.

"All that's left o' the White Masks 'cept me—an' Slick," the man explained.

Evidently he had made his preparations, for concealed in the shadow at the end of the hut they found three horses, saddled and bridled. It was darker now, for the moon was hidden by a big bank of cloud, but there was light enough to show, towering above them, a black bulk of mountain which Phil guessed must be the second of the Pinnacles. At their feet stretched a great gulf of varying blacknesses, reaching away until it merged indefinitely with the sky. Their guide, however, gave them little time to study the scenery.

"Gotta hurry," he said in his curious gruff voice. "There's on'y one trail for the first few miles."

When they were mounted he went ahead, the girl following, and Embley bringing up the rear. The pathway, for it was nothing more, led along the face of the mountain, dipping and twisting, passing through occasional clumps of stunted vegetation, and at times skirting a precipice where one misplaced step would have meant destruction. The girl shuddered as she remembered that she must have ridden this route blindfold.

Her mind, however, was too full to dwell long even on present danger. The dead bandit's revelation had made it clear why her father had hated and yet suffered Bartholomew, but it did not explain the mystery of his disappearance, and it left her still guessing as to Severn. Was the foreman the scheming, guilty rogue the Bar B rancher had made him appear, she was asking herself. Distrusting Bart as deeply as she now did, she could hardly believe it. And the queer little outlaw who for no apparent reason was effecting their escape, what part did he play in this tangled web of intrigue and crime? Silently, slumped forward in his saddle, he paced ahead of her, for the road was too narrow and rough to permit more than a walking gait.

They had been riding for more than an hour, a long, gradual descent, when the leader turned off the trail into a little forest of pines, halted and got down.

"Heard somethin'—goin' to scout a few," he said laconically. "Stay here, an' keep quiet."

Without waiting for any reply, he climbed back up the way they had come and vanished in the gloom. The girl edged her horse over to Embley.

"Do you think he is to be trusted?" she whispered.

"I believe so, and he's our only chance," the Judge replied. "Personally, I am prepared to take any risk to reach Hope in time to foil that scoundrel Bartholomew. If they hang Severn——"

The girl sensed the deadly menace in the unspoken threat. "Bartholomew told me Severn killed my father," she ventured.

The Judge snorted. "Severn had no more to do with your father's death than I had," he replied, unaware how equivocal his answer appeared to her.

The return of the outlaw put an end to the conversation. He was hurrying, and it was evident he brought news.

"They're a-comin'—musta got back sooner," he panted, flinging himself into the saddle. "No use tryin' to hide—they know this country like yu do yore own doorstep. We'll have to stand 'em off; there's a Winchester on yore saddle, Judge, an' I know a good place."

Leaving the trees, they followed him at a gallop across an open space of perhaps a quarter of a mile, and pulled up at the foot of a tall bluff where a number of fallen fragments from the cliff above offered a rough rampart. Tying the horses behind the biggest of the boulders, and finding Phil a safe position, the two men lay down, rifles ready.

"Cuss that moon," muttered the little man, for the clouds had passed.

"It'll help us more than them," the Judge pointed out. "They can't rush us."

"Shore, but we can't sneak away," the other argued.

"There they are. What's the idea?"

"Flag of truce—they want to talk."

Four riders had emerged from the pines, and one of them, ahead of the rest, was waving a white scarf. They came boldly on until they were some two hundred yards away, and then Patch stood up.

"That'll be near enough," he called out. "Anythin' on yore mind?"

"What's the idea, Patch, runnin' off the prisoners this-away?" the leader asked.

"I got my reasons but I ain't explainin' to yu," the one-eyed man replied cogly. "I'll give yu a bit of advice, though; light a shuck an' get outa the country while the goin's good."

The outlaw laughed. "Feelin' yore oats some, ain't

yu?" he sneered. "We'll go when we're good an' ready, but first we want the gal an' the Judge."

"Come an' get 'em," retorted the little man.

"No need to take risks," the other pointed out. "Yu can't git away. All we gotta do is wait till help comes; we've sent for it."

"Who'd yu send—Slick?" Patch asked, and chuckled when he heard the curse the question provoked.

"Well, what yu goin' to do?" the bandit queried.

"Shoot if yu don't show yore tail mighty sudden," snapped out the one-eyed man, standing clear and levelling his rifle.

With a furious gesture the fellow wheeled his horse, and at the same moment came three spurts of flame from behind him. Patch regained his shelter untouched, he and the Judge sending shots in return. Apparently they met with no success, for they saw the attackers vanish into the gloom of the pines. For some time silence reigned.

"All bluff about sendin' for help," Patch remarked. "They ain't got no one to send. Betche they try an' Injun up on us; there's a cloud a-comin' now."

He was right. In a few moments a veil of vapour misted the moon. Peering through the uncertain light, Patch fancied he could see a dark blotch moving laboriously over the grass. Carefully taking aim, he fired; the blotch seemed to give a spasmodic jerk and then subside. The next moment a loop dropped over his arms and he was flung violently backwards, his gun clattering on the stones beside him. Dazed by the fall, he felt the rope twisted about him; a few turns and he was powerless. A glance showed that his companions were in no better case. Bitterly he realised that the attackers had outwitted him. While one of them sneaked up in front, the other three had crept around the open space and come upon them from the rear. The man who had borne the flag of truce was regarding him with an ugly look.

"Well, Patch, so're goin' to learn it don't pay to renig."

he said, and then to one of the others, "Go an' look to Fred."

The man crossed the open ground, stooped for a moment where the blotch had been, and then returned.

"Fred's cashed," he said briefly.

"So yu got him, yu dirty little runt," the bandit grated. "Well, I'm sendin' yu after him, *pronto*."

He drew his pistol, swung it aloft and chopped down on the prostrate prisoner. In another second the bullet would have sped, but a cool, rasping voice intervened:

"Scuse me, gents, but is this a private scrap, or can anybody horn in?" it said.

The startled outlaws looked up to find the tables turned; two strangers, who had stolen up unperceived, were covering them with levelled pistols.

"Shootin' a man when yu got him hog-tied don't appeal none to me," the newcomer continued. "Reach for the sky, yu coyotes."

Two of the bandits promptly obeyed, but the would-be slayer of Patch, who had his gun out, took a chance and turned it on the stranger. But he was not quick enough; ere he could pull the trigger, the other's gun crashed and the outlaw went down, sprawling grotesquely. One glance showed that he was dead, and the man who had fired the shot nodded his satisfaction. He then stepped over to the girl.

"Well, Miss Phil, so we've found yu at last," he said.

She gave a cry of joy. "Why, Rayton, how do you happen to be here?" she asked.

"Severn left me an' Purdy of the X T to comb the Pinnacles after we failed to find yu at the Cavern," the cowboy explained. "We was shore gettin' disheartened when we heard the shootin' an' p'inted for it." He looked at Embley. "Burn my hide, if it ain't the Judge!"

In as few words as possible the lawyer outlined the position. The cowboy bit on an oath when he learned of Severn's danger.

"What we better do?" he asked in perplexity.

"We must get out of the mountains as quickly as we can," the Judge said. "Then Miss Masters, myself and this fellow Patch will head for Hope, while you and the X T man will collect your outfits and follow us. We may be in time."

"If we ain't, that town'll shore see doin's," Rayton promised. "What about these two jaspers?" He indicated the outlaws who, deprived of their weapons, and covered by Purdy, stood sullenly waiting.

"Turn them loose," Embley said. "They don't deserve it, but we're pressed for time, and there's been killing enough already."

Rayton agreed. Patch was released, and the other two men were set adrift, unarmed, with the plain intimation that if they remained in the country they would be shot on sight. The journey to the plains was then resumed. The Judge rode in silence, his head down, and was impatient of the slightest delay. Phil realised that this was due to his anxiety for Severn's safety, and it impressed her. Only once she summoned the courage to ask him a question.

"Is it true that Severn was once known as Sudden, the outlaw?"

"Yes, but he was not an outlaw, he was a deputy-sheriff in the employ of the Governor," the Judge told her. "You don't like Severn, but one day I hope you'll know him better, and realise—what you owe him."

The old man's voice was rather stern, and contained more than a hint of reproof. She said no more.

CHAPTER XXII

ON the morning of Severn's dramatic return to captivity, the town seethed with excitement. The ordinary business of the day appeared to be forgotten, and the white men, Mexicans and half-breeds who formed the population, thronged the saloons. A few Indians from the nearest Reservation stalked about, wrapped in their gaudy blankets. They did not know what all the stir was about, but they looked gravely on, said "How" at appropriate intervals, and absorbed such "fire-water" as unwise generosity proffered. This state of affairs provided material for thought to some of the citizens.

"Suthin's goin' on," Bent remarked to Callahan. "There's men spendin' money on licker that never had none to spend afore, an' I got Greasers at my bar now that I'd 'a' throwed out on their ears yestiddy, knowin' they couldn't pay."

"What possessed Severn to come trapesin' back?" asked the storekeeper.

"He's one square fella—he wouldn't run away," Bent told him. "Trouble is, he won't git a straight deal."

"I'm after hearin' that crooked devil, Lufton, has come. For why, I ask ye?"

"I'm bettin' Bart sent for him, an' when them two get together yu can risk a stack there's dirty work to be done. Point is, what can we do? Findin' them stolen notes on Severn has shore played the devil; pretty nigh the whole dam town reckons he robbed the bank, an' Mad Martin ain't discouragin' that notion none at all; I never seen him so busy, or so free with his dollars."

"True for ye. Kape an eye on the store whilst I step up to the 'Come Again' an' find out about Lufton."

As the storekeeper went along the street, the signs of unrest were apparent. Little groups of men were dotted about arguing, gesticulating, and the grimness of their faces conveyed an atmosphere of menace. He noticed that the nucleus of nearly every gathering consisted of one or two of the Bar B punchers.

"Bart's workin' the town up, an' for what?" he asked himself.

Passing through the swing-doors of the saloon, he found that rumour for once had spoken truly. At a table in a far corner, apart from the sullen, threatening customers who crowded the bar, Black Bart was entertaining a visitor. This was a thin, shambling figure of a man approaching fifty, dressed in a shiny black coat, trousers stuffed into boot-tops, a collar far from clean, and a cravat which bore abundant evidence of having been too often tied by stumbling fingers. The puffy face, receding jaw, and vacillating eyes told their own story. This was Judge Lufton, who had obtained office by political wire-pulling, and in spite of certain lapses, had hitherto managed to hold it by the same means. Had Callahan been able to hear their conversation, he would have found the answer to his question.

"Yu've happened along just hunky, Judge," Bart was saying, as he filled the visitor's glass. "Yo're the man this town's needin' bad right now."

The man of law straightened up in his chair. "As an unworthy servant of the public, Mr. Bartholomew, I am at the disposal of the citizens," he said unctuously. "In what way——?"

"There's a criminal in the calaboose here waitin' to be tried," Bart told him. "He's a desperate character—got away last night, but was recaptured by the sheriff." The lie slipped easily from his lips. "Our gaol ain't none too strong, an' we don't want that to happen again; next time he might be luckier."

"What is the offence?" Lufton enquired.

"He robbed the bank here, shot the manager, an'

murdered an old friend o' mine," the Bar B owner returned coolly. "If that ain't enough, there's other charges."

"Providence having given us only one neck apiece, I should say it was more than enough," the Judge said, with ponderous humour. "Why don't you send him to the capital?"

"To escape on the way, or get off with a packed jury 'cause he's got a pull somewheres, huh?" Bart retorted. "No, sir, this town can do its own tryin'. As I told yu, the fella's a hard case. Mebbe it'll surprise yu to hear he's the chap as used to be known as Sudden, the outlaw."

The Judge was surprised; his vacuous eyes opened. "But if I remember rightly, Sudden was supposed to have been in the employ of the Governor," he remarked.

"There yu are," Bartholomew said triumphantly. "That was the excuse for lettin' him off; yu see, he has got a pull."

"If he's still got it——" Lufton began dubiously.

"He ain't," the rancher cut in. "An' the cases against him are plain open an' shut this time. Besides, all yu gotta do is try the fella; the jury finds the verdict. Once that's given, what happens ain't no business o' yourn."

There was a sinister suggestion in the last words which made the other man look up apprehensively.

"You mustn't forget that I represent the law, Mr. Bartholomew," he pointed out, with a rather ludicrous attempt at dignity.

"Ain't that the very reason I'm askin' yu to take charge?" the big man retorted. "Now, see here, Judge; the folks in thisyer town are gettin' all het up over this case—most of 'em lost money in the robbery, an' the fella as was rubbed out was plenty popular. I've got 'em millin' as yet, but if they stampede there'll be a neck-tie party shore as yo're born, an' that won't look too good with a reg'ler judge in the town who might 'a' given the accused a fair trial an' done things legah."

Lufton emptied his glass, replenishing it with a shaky

hand. He had experience of the West, had seen mob law at work, and knew that in the state of tension the town was now in, a spark would cause an explosion. He had a mental vision of a savage, relentless crowd storming the gaol, dragging out the prisoner and hanging him to the nearest tree without a hearing. The dark, scowling faces, muttered conversations and significant nods, all told of the storm that was brewing. Surely, in the interest of law and order, it was his duty to step in and see justice meted out to the malefactor. Bartholomew's next remark decided him.

"There'll be a fee o' two hundred dollars," he said. "Course, if yu'd ruther we waited for Embley . . ."

Lufton winced like a spurred horse; he hated the Desert Edge jurist, a fact of which Bartholomew was well aware.

"No need for that," he said. "I'll take the case."

"Good for yu," Bartholomew smiled. "I don't mind admittin' that I'm glad. Embley ain't popular round here, he's a pal o' the prisoner, an' there's more than a suspicion that he's in cahoots with him to grab the murdered man's property."

Lufton's eyes gleamed evilly. "Shouldn't be surprised," he sneered. "There's usually mud at the bottom o' still water. When yu startin' the trial?"

"Half an hour's time," replied the rancher. "No sense in waitin', an' it wouldn't be safe anyways. I'll tell Muger to get this place cleared for it."

The news that the accused was to be tried at once by Judge Lufton spread like wildfire through the town, and the general feeling was one of satisfaction. Never before had Hope Again enjoyed such a sensation. Killings, followed by summary justice were not unknown, but a regular trial by an official judge was a novelty, and the "Come Again" soon bore witness to the fact. In deference to Lufton's position, some endeavour was made to give the room a court-like appearance. The judge's bench was represented by a table, with seats on either side for the more important citizens. Twelve chairs were arranged for the jury, another

for the sheriff. Immediately in front of the Judge were three more chairs, the middle one for the prisoner, and the others for the deputies guarding him; this was the dock. The onlookers perched themselves on such support as they could find, or lolled against the walls.

Severn's first intimation that he was to be put on his trial immediately came from the deputy, Jake, whom he had treated so unceremoniously the night before. The man appeared to bear no malice, for he grinned cheerfully through the spyhole as he said :

"Better be gittin' ready to speak yore piece, Severn; the Judge'll be wantin' yu at the court mighty soon."

"Has Embley turned up, then?" asked the prisoner.

"Naw, Lufton's goin' to try yu, an' I'm bound to say it's mean luck he should happen along. If yu got any argyments yu better think 'em up, for yu'll need some."

"I'm obliged to yu," Severn said. "Sorry I had to rough-house yu last night, but——"

"Shucks!" Jake interposed. "I ain't rememberin' that. I'd orter knowed better. Done the same m'self in yore place—if I'd 'a'thought of it."

The voice of the other deputy broke in "Fetch him along—just got word he's needed."

"There, I've done wasted yore time," Jake said regretfully. "Yu'll have to think up suthin' on the way."

Certainly the prisoner had plenty to occupy his mind as, with an armed deputy on either side, he paced up the street. Calculating his chances the night before, he had come to the conclusion that, apart from a possibility of being lynched, he was in no immediate danger; either he would be tried in Hope by Judge Embley, or sent to the capital. The advent of a strange and possibly hostile judge was, as he had to admit, "a hoss of a different brand," and this indecent haste to bring him to account looked ominous. He wished now that he had not ordered his outfit to keep away from Hope; if it came to the worst . . .

The entry of the accused increased the buzz of conversa-

tion in the crowded court-room. With calm confidence he walked to the dock, took off his hat, and sat down. His bonds had been removed, but the deputies drew their guns as they sat beside him. There was a suspicion of a smile on Severn's face as he noted the precaution. He looked at the Judge, then the jury—which had already been empanelled—and realised that he stood no chance; the twelve "good men and true" were all supporters of Bartholomew, and had been chosen for that reason. His steady eyes swept the audience. He saw Bent, Callahan and Larry, and was searching for Lunt when the little gunman entered, followed by four of the Bar B outfit. His face told Severn a story.

"Snap's killin' mad," he concluded. "Reckon when he heard o' this he started to fetch the boys, an' them four jaspers held him up an' are ridin' herd on him. Bart don't want no interference."

And this was just what had happened. Stopped at the entrance to the town, Lunt, who had ridden in that morning, had been forced to return and become a helpless spectator of his friend's ordeal. Not that the Bar B rancher suspected any connection between the two men; he had simply ordered that no one should leave the town; the Lazy M and X T riders could be more easily dealt with afterwards.

Lounging in a chair by the side of the Judge, with Martin, and several of his men, Bartholomew could not keep the gloating satisfaction out of his eyes. Nevertheless, from time to time he glanced expectantly at the door, and the prisoner smiled grimly—Bartholomew was wondering what had become of his foreman. A rap on the judge's table stopped the hum of conversation.

"Well, sheriff, what is the charge against the prisoner?" Lufton asked.

Tyler rose, puffing out his chest in a hopeless attempt to appear dignified. To do honour to the occasion he had washed and also shaved, but the innovation did not meet with approval. As one citizen audibly remarked, "Fella with a face like Her's didn't orzer wash; it ain't fair to us."

The sheriff, however, did not hear this criticism, and was very satisfied with himself.

"There's a right smart o' charges, Judge," he stated. "Attemptin' to kill Mister Martin here, robbin' the bank an' shootin' the manager, murderin' Philip Masters, breakin' gaol——"

"Well, well, I reckon that'll do to go on with," Lufton interrupted. "We'll take the bank robbery and the murder. If he's guilty of them we can let him off the rest."

The bitter witticism sent a ripple of merriment round the room, and the maker of it permitted himself a thin-lipped smile.

"The court will deal with the robbery first," he decided. "Call your evidence, sheriff."

Rapson, the banker, stepped forward and gave his account of the raid. Questioned by the Judge, he admitted that the robbers' faces were so hidden that he could not see them, but in clothes, height and build the man who shot at him might have been the accused. Further, Severn had drawn out his money just before the robbery took place, and the notes handed to him did not include those he was trying to cash when arrested, which were part of the plunder. Lufton looked severely at the prisoner.

"You want to put any questions?" he asked.

Severn stood up. "Shore," he said, and turned to the witness. "Yu certain the man who downed yu was not smaller than me?"

"Quite," returned the banker. "Looking at you now I have an impression he was even bigger."

Severn nodded. "So that, as yu couldn't see his face, it might 'a' been any fella as big as me, or a bit bigger." His eyes roamed round the room. "Mister Bartholomew, for example?"

The witness protested volubly. The suggestion was absurd. Mr. Bartholomew had been most kind, and he had five thousand dollars deposited in the bank.

"Which he wouldn't lose if he robbed yu," Severn

pointed out. "An' if I was goin' to, why should I trouble to draw my money?"

"Why did you?" asked the Judge.

The foreman explained, handing up the warning he had received. Lufton glanced at it superciliously and passed it to the jury. They scanned it in turn, and then one of them remarked sourly:

"Yu kept this mighty dark, didn't yu?"

Bent jumped up. "Severn showed it to me an' Ridge of the X T," he volunteered. "We didn't know what was back of it any more than he did, but we both drewed our balances out. Anybody think we done the robbery?"

"Nobody's suggesting that anyone but the accused did the stealing, sir," remarked the judge.

Though this pompous remark may have impressed some of the audience, it only drew an impudent grin from the prisoner. "That's where yo're wrong, Judge," he said, "I'm suggestin' that the man sittin' beside yu, Bartholomew, oughta be standin' here instead o' me, an' I've got evidence to prove it."

A shuffling of feet and craning of necks proclaimed the sensation this statement evoked. In response to a nod from Severn, the saloon-keeper handed to him the book and notes taken from the Bar B ranch. Bartholomew answered the accusation with a scornful laugh.

"Trot out yore proof," he cried.

Severn held up the account book. "That yores?" he asked.

The rancher stared surprisedly. "I reckon it is, though how yu——"

"The writin' in it would be yores, too?"

"O' course. What's that gotta do with it?"

"I'm tellin' yu. When the White Masks run off one o' my outfit, they left a notice behind sayin' what I had to do to get him back. Here's the notice, an' it's written on a page taken outa that book, as yu can see by the number on t, an' the handwritin' is the same."

There was hardly a sound in the room as he passed the book and the paper up to the Judge, who examined them and looked enquiringly at Bartholomew. The rancher, who had been doing some quick thinking; had his reply ready.

"I missed that book 'bout a month or so ago," he began. "I reckon it was stole by a fella named Darby who had a grudge against me, an' is now ridin' for the Lazy M. The writin' is a pretty good imitation o' mine."

"Which yu didn't recognise when I showed yu the notice at the time I brought Shadwell in," Severn reminded him.

"Bah! I scarcely looked at it," Bartholomew lied.

"As for the book bein' stole, that's correct; I took it from the Bar B ranch-house last night—there's another charge for yu, sheriff," pursued the prisoner smilingly. "An' at the same time, in a locked drawer o' yore desk, Bartholomew, I found these. Rapson will tell us what they are."

He handed the roll of bills to the banker, who compared them with a list he took from his pocket. "I paid these to the prisoner when he drew out his money," Rapson said.

Bartholomew and the Judge were whispering together. Then the latter looked at the prisoner.

"Well," he sneered. "What's your point?"

Severn saw that he was fighting a hopeless battle, but it was not in the man's nature to give in.

"It oughtn't to need explainin'," he said acidly. "That book an' the notice prove that Bartholomew is chief o' the White Masks. When they raided the Lazy M an' abducted Miss Masters, they took my bills an' substituted stolen ones to implicate me. I might as well add, Judge, that I broke out a gaol to get them things, an' I returned o' my own free will." A whimsical smile hovered on his lips. "I had to make a devil of a row to get back into gaol again."

Some of the spectators, remembering the scene of the morning, guffawed at the recollection. Bartholomew leant back in his chair and also laughed.

"Mighty smart, Severn," he said. "Yu oughta be

writin' books, not stealin' 'em." He looked round the room. "Well, boys, yu better take an' string me up for collarin' my own coin."

The Judge, jury and a number of those present smiled widely at the joke, but there were some who looked dubious. Bartholomew evidently noticed this, for he directed a meaning glance at the jury, and immediately Muger, who was acting as foreman, spoke.

"See here, Judge," he said. "All this jaw ain't gettin' us nowhere. The jury don't want to hear no more about the robbery; this fella's found with the goods on him; it's an open an' shut case."

"If you have come to a decision on that charge, gentlemen, we can get on with the murder," Lufton said.

"Whose murder—mine?" asked Severn sarcastically. "It amounts to that, yu know, because the man who could prove I had nothin' to gain by Masters' death ain't here. I mean Judge Embley."

"He is under grave suspicion of being your accomplice," Lufton said severely. "And the fact that he is not to be found bears it out. He got you your present job?"

"It was through him I met Masters," Severn admitted.

"And soon after you go to the Lazy M, your employer disappears," the Judge went on. "How did you get the rifle he was known to have taken with him?"

If he had hoped the abrupt question would discompose the accused he was disappointed; Severn told a plain story of the slaying of Ignacio and the finding of the weapon.

"An' that's a lie!" Bartholomew burst out. "Ignacio was heard of in Mexico a few weeks back, as my foreman, Penton, can testify."

The prisoner smiled grimly; he had his doubts about that. Again he produced a slip of paper. "Here's somethin' else I found on the Greaser," he said. "Yu'll notice it's another imitation o' Bartholomew's penmanship."

The Judge gave it a casual glance, and then for a moment his eyes met those of the Bar B owner meaningly.

"You seem fond of writing," he said. "Did yu tell anyone about the gun?"

"On'y Miss Masters," was the reply.

"And she's missing, too; all the people who might corroborate your statements appear to be," Lufton commented cuttingly. "Any more evidence, sheriff?"

This was Tyler's great moment, and he prepared to make the most of it. Strutting forward, he told how he and his deputy, Jake, riding through The Sink, had noticed tracks, followed them up, and found the missing rancher's clothes. One by one he produced the garments, handing them to the Judge.

"An' underneath 'em we found this," he finished. "Yu'll see it's got the prisoner's initials on it."

Tense silence reigned as the weapon was passed first to the Judge and then, at his direction, to the accused man who examined it curiously.

"Is that yours?" came the question.

"Yeah, it was taken from me by the White Masks," the puncher replied without hesitation. "But it didn't have them letters on it then. Yu don't print as well as yu write, Bartholomew."

"Pretty good at findin' answers, ain't he?" the Bar B cattleman mocked, and the jury, at whom the remark was directed, smiled in agreement.

Bent stepped forward and held up a hand. "'Scuse me, Judge, I'm puttin' in a protest that thisyer trial ain't reg'ler," he said. "It's bin rushed an' the accused ain't had no chanct to prepare a defence or git his witnesses. The prosecution ain't proved any motive for his bumping off Masters, an' the evidence makes him out a plain darn fool, which every man here knows he ain't. He tries to cash bills at the bank he stole 'em from, an' he hides the clothes o' the fella he murdered an' leaves his gun with his initials on with 'em. I put it to the jury, does the prisoner look plumb loco?"

Lufton's smile was oily as he replied to this appeal.

"Mister Bent, as a friend of the accused, has to raise objections," he explained to the jury. "What he does not realise is that clever criminals get over-confident and make mistakes. As for motive, the court knows that the murder was part of a deep plot to obtain the dead man's property." He looked craftily at the twelve citizens. "If more evidence is required——" Muger shook his head. "Very well, gentlemen, you may retire and consider your verdict."

Then Bartholomew flung his bombshell.

"I reckon the jury oughta know, Judge, that this fella who's been masqueradin' here under the name o' Severn, used to be better knowed as Sudden, the outlaw," he rasped out, with a vindictive glare in the direction of the dock.

The whistle of indrawn breath and a medley of ejaculations greeted the announcement, and every man in the room pressed forward to get a good look at the famous gunman, as though they were seeing him for the first time. Excited whispers passed from mouth to mouth as stories of his exploits were recalled. Given his guns, he might have walked out of the court unhurt, such had been his repute, but lacking them . . . In the midst of it all, the man himself sat, his face a mask of immobility, his eyes coolly contemplating the men who were to decide whether he lived or died. The low buzz of conversation and the scraping of shifted feet on the sanded floor ceased when Muger, who had been whispering to his men, stood up.

"There ain't no need to retire, Judge," he stated. "We're all agreed."

"And your verdict is?"

"Guilty as hell."

The Judge turned his gaze upon the accused. "You have heard the jury's decision," he said. "Anything to say?"

Severn's narrowed eyes were coldly contemptuous. "I reckon yore reputation flatters yu, seh," he drawled.

The gibe penetrated even Lufton's tough hide. His yellow, pasty face took on a crimson tint, and his thin lips contorted into an ugly snarl.

"You have been rightly found guilty of the crimes charged against you," he said. "It only remains for me to pronounce the penalty, which is, that you be hanged by the neck till you are dead." He turned to Tyler. "Sheriff, you will see to it that the prisoner is conducted to the capital, where the sentence will be carried out."

The harsh voice, with its travesty of judicial gravity, could not conceal the speaker's inward satisfaction; he almost seemed to exult in the power that enabled him to send a younger man than himself to his death. Having thus cunningly evaded all responsibility for what he knew was about to happen, he leant back in his chair and lit a cigar. For a moment there was silence, and then the meaning of the Judge's pronouncement dawned upon the assembly. A hoarse, murmuring growl like that of a savage beast deprived of its prey rumbled through the room. Mad Martin leapt upon a chair.

"To hell with sendin' him to the capital!" he shouted. "He's mebbe got a pull there; that's how he got off afore. I'm sayin' this town's got ropes an' trees enough to do its own hangin'."

"That's the talk," said another, and instantly the cry was taken up from all parts of the court-room. Bartholomew was silent, a smile of sardonic satisfaction on his cruel lips. In local parlance, he was "sittin' pretty"—things were going exactly as he had planned. The Judge rapped on his table and managed to get a hearing.

"Sheriff, I shall hold you responsible for seeing that the law is observed," he warned.

Again the uproar broke out, and the sheriff, his recently-acquired self-esteem all gone, might easily have been mistaken for the condemned man, so woeful did he appear. He looked appealingly at Bartholomew, but the big man shook his head and laughed.

"It's yore job, sheriff," he said.

"Ropes an' hosses," Martin yelled. "Fetch him along, boys."

A rush was made, and despite the fact that a number of the more moderate citizens strove to help them, the sheriff and his deputies were brushed aside like flies, and the prisoner was hustled out into the open street.

"Where now?" asked a dozen.

"Take him to Forby's—the ghost there must be gittin' lonesome," Martin cried, and the suggestion was adopted with a shout of approval.

On the back of a horse, with the loop of a lariat round his neck, and surrounded by men with drawn guns, Severn began what he did not doubt was his last ride, for the levity and rough humour, typical of a Western mob, was no indication that the grim programme would not be carried out. These men were primitive, slaves of their easily-aroused passions; their reasoning was crude; they saw only the obvious. Bartholomew had money in the bank, therefore he would not rob it; Severn's gun found with the clothes was to them conclusive proof that he had murdered the missing man. The temperate citizens, who might have considered the more subtle evidence produced, were carried away by the turbulent faction.

To a man, all who had been in the court-room joined the procession. Bartholomew rode with the sheriff and Lufton, the latter knowing that to save his own face he must protest to the end.

The condemned man's features were as impassive as a statue's. He had played, lost, and must pay, though the cards had been stacked against him. In the course of his tempestuous career he had dared death many times, and he could face the fell Monarch fearlessly. Like most men of his type, Severn was something of a fatalist. A violent end was an ever-present possibility, and it was part of his creed that a man must take his medicine without squealing. Bartholomew's hand was evident throughout, even in the choice of the place where he was to die. He remembered what Penton had said, and almost smiled at the thought that the Bar B owner had yet one more blow to receive.

The journey did not take long. As they rode round a clump of trees and emerged into the little glade where stood the ruined cabin, Martin, who was leading, pulled up and yelled excitedly :

"Hell's flames ! A fella's hangin' there a'ready."

The riders surged forward and grouped themselves around the big cottonwood with its dangling, ghastly burden.

"Ain't that yore grey, Bent ?" asked one, pointing to the dead horse.

"Shore is. Missed him this mornin'—reckoned he'd dragged his picket-pin," the saloon-keeper replied.

"Old Forby's ghost has bin busy," said another. "That brand's bin re-cut, an' what's them blame notches mean, anyways ?"

Bartholomew needed but one look. "It's Penton," he said. "How the devil——?"

Martin untied the end of the rope, lowered the body to the ground, and bent over to examine it.

"Plugged through the forehead," he pronounced. "An' he had his gun out." He pointed to where the weapon lay in a patch of sand. Bart shot a furious look at Severn.

"This is yore work, damn yu !" he snarled. "Yu broke gaol to do it. Well, yu'll be takin' his place."

His rage was largely assumed ; inwardly he experienced a feeling of relief. Penton knew too much, and also, would have wanted too much. Once Severn was settled with, his way was clear, for he did not doubt he could bring the girl to her senses, and Embley would do what was required or follow Severn. Once again Lufton called on the sheriff to perform his duty, and Tyler moved forward, only to shrink back when a gun was thrust in his face.

"I warn you all that the act you are about to commit is unlawful," the Judge quavered.

Jeers answered him. The finding of Penton's body had put the finishing touch, bringing to the surface the blood lust that lies dormant in most men. Pulled from his horse, the prisoner was placed beneath the tree, the rope flung over the

branch and gripped by three self-appointed executioners. Standing there, waiting for the word which would hurl him into eternity, Severn gazed indifferently at the ring of brutal faces. Behind them he could see Larry, furious with despair, Bent, and some of the more sober citizens. Bartholomew, Lufton and the sheriff were standing together, and a few yards away, leaning against a tree, was Snap Lunt, apparently taking no interest in the proceedings. But Severn was not deceived, and wondered what desperate scheme the gunman was devising; for he knew Snap, knew that he would face any odds and go down biting to the last.

A little breeze which tempered the heat of the sun and stirred the leaves to a gentle murmur, the piping of the birds, and the gurgling laughter of the water as it tumbled over the stones in the creek-bed, combined to create a scene violently at variance with the tragedy about to be enacted.

CHAPTER XXIII

Soon after the procession to Forby's had set out on its mission of vengeance, a visitor came riding into Hope. He was a short, rather corpulent man of about fifty, dressed in a dark coat, trousers folded neatly into the tops of his high boots, a soft black hat, and carefully-tied cravat. He wore no weapons in sight. As he progressed along the forsaken street his amazement increased, and presently, seeing a slatternly woman at an open door, he pulled up and removed his hat, revealing a crop of iron-grey hair.

"Pardon me, ma'am, but the town seems somewhat deserted," he smiled.

"Aye, all the crazy fool men is gone to the hangin'," she told him. "Why, I had to whup my boy what's on'y eight, or he'd 'a' bin off too."

"The hanging?" repeated the visitor.

"Shore, yu know what a hangin' is, I reckon," she replied. "They tried a man this mornin' an' now they've gone to string him up. Fine-lookin'-fella, too; not my idea of a bad 'un, but yu can't go by looks. They say he robbed the bank here an' murdered his boss."

"Then he deserves to swing," the stranger decided. "What was his name?"

"Severn he called hisself, but they claim he's Sudden, the famous outlaw," the woman said.

At this she saw the man straighten up in his saddle, and when he spoke again his voice had an edge.

"Where is the hangin' to take place?"

"Over to Forby's. It ain't far, though why they want to go trapesin' about when there's trees a-plenty close here I dunno, but men'll allus snatch a chance to waste time."

The stranger dived into a pocket, produced a five-dollar bill and held it out. "I'll be obliged if your little boy will guide me there," he said. "I promise he shan't see any hanging."

The woman grabbed the money, and in response to her shrill call, a barefooted, tear-stained urchin appeared.

"Abe, yo're to show the gent the way to Forby's, but if I find yu've saw the hangin', I'll take the hide off'n yu," she warned.

The horseman stooped, lifted the child to the saddle in front of him, thanked the woman, and rode away.

"The shortest road, Abe," he said. "Get there in time and there's a dollar for you. If we're too late . . ."

He did not finish the sentence, but the pleasant, genial tone had gone from his voice, and there was no warmth in the keen grey eyes.

* * * * *

Mad Martin, who had constituted himself master of ceremonies, placed his hands on his hips and contemplated the condemned man with mocking malice.

"This is where I even up, Severn," he hissed. "An' as for that dawg, I'm agoin' to cut him in strips with my quirt when yo're—gone."

"Mind he don't send yu after Penton, yu polecat," the cowpuncher retorted.

White with fury, Martin was about to give the signal to those at the rope, when someone shouted, "Who's this a-comin'?"

On the eastern side of the glade, through a break in the trees, three riders came in sight, spurring weary horses to a last gallop. Bartholomew gave one glance, muttered a curse, and shouted:

"Finish him off."

"Stop! At the first pull on that rope yu 'die, Bartholomew, an' the fellas holdin' it follow yu."

It was Snap Lunt's voice, vibrant with menace. Standing

in a half crouch, his back protected by the tree-trunk, he had both guns levelled, one of them directly covering the Bar B man.

"Who are yu, an' what are yu hornin' in for?" the rancher roared.

"My name's Snap Lunt, an' I'm just seein' fair, that's all," the little man said quietly. "Yu can hang that fella just as easy in ten minits' time, when we know what these folk want. Mebbe they're just honin' to see the hangin'."

The name sent a quiver of excitement through the crowd, and the men holding the rope dropped it; they were taking no chances with a marksman of Snap's reputation for accuracy; moreover, two of them had been present at Severn's arrest, when the gunman had an attack of "nerves." Bartholomew, too, was nonplussed, and before he could think of any expedient, the newcomers had arrived.

"Thank God, we're in time!" Judge Embley gasped, as he flung himself from his panting animal and helped Phil to dismount.

The third of the party, a smallish, one-eyed man, whom some of those present remembered seeing once or twice in town, got down more leisurely, and stood surveying the scene indifferently. No one took much notice of him, all interest being centred on the girl and Embley. The latter walked straight to his fellow-jurist.

"What's the meaning of this, Lufton?" he enquired. "Surely I don't find you assisting at a lynching?"

"Certainly not; I came here to prevent one," Lufton replied indignantly. "At the request of the citizens of Hope Again, I tried the accused this morning, found him guilty of robbery and murder, sentenced him to be hanged, and ordered the sheriff to take him to the capital for execution. These men, fearing the culprit might escape the penalty of his misdeeds, decided to take the punishment into their own hands. I have protetted in vain."

"And Mr. Bartholomew, has he protested?" Embley asked witheringly.

Lufton flushed. "He has given me every assistance," he said stiffly.

"Even to tellin' his men to finish the prisoner off when he saw yu were comin'," Bent put in.

"Is that so?" Embley flashed.

"I didn't know it was yu," Bartholomew lied, with a savage look at the saloon-keeper. "I thought it was a rescue party from his ranch, an' didn't want trouble. Anyway, I don't see that yore arrival makes any difference; we're strong enough to do as we like, I guess."

"Better guess again, Bartholomew," Embley smiled. "Unless I'm mistaken there are folk coming now who'll have a word to say."

In fact, the distant drum of pounding hoofs was audible, and away off on the plain a compact body of horsemen was approaching at full speed. The Bar B man's face darkened as he saw that this new factor was composed of about a dozen men from the X T and Lazy M. An awkward bunch, but his supporters outnumbered them, and if it came to a pitched battle . . . He turned arrogantly to Embley as the punchers dashed up, pulled their sweating, foam-flecked ponies to a halt, and whooped with delight when they saw Severn standing there, a grin of welcome on his lean face.

"Well, what d'yu reckon yu can do?" Bartholomew sneered.

"Hope is under my jurisdiction; I can order the case to be re-heard," Embley replied.

Lufton's face crimsoned. "It would be most unconventional to re-try a guilty man," he protested.

"It would be a damn sight more unconventional to hang an innocent one," snapped the other.

The principal actor in the drama, the condemned man, watched the proceedings unperturbed. He had removed the noose from his neck and was leaning carelessly against the tree which had so nearly been put to a more sinister use. With Embley there, he was content to await the issue. His friends, at a whispered word from Ridge, had kept their

saddles and strung out in a half-circle, ready for instant action. Bartholomew's men, too, sullen and savage-looking, were also prepared. Only a spark was needed to start the conflagration.

"An' who's goin' to re-try the case, yu, the prisoner's pal, or Lufton?" Bartholomew asked jeeringly.

"That's a question I can perhaps settle for you, gentlemen," said a quiet voice, and the stout little man who had found the town of Hope deserted, walked forward. So absorbed were the spectators, that his advent had not been noticed.

Embley spun round and his face lit up when he saw the speaker. In a second his hand was out. "Bleke!" he exclaimed. "I never in my life was so glad to see you. How in the name of——?"

The little stranger shrugged his shoulders and smiled whimsically. "Just happened along," he said.

He nodded to Lufton, whose unwholesome face was now the colour of cheese, and looked curiously at Black Bart.

"Mr. Bartholomew of the Bar B, Governor," Embley introduced.

"I've heard of him," Bleke said in a non-committal tone, and did not offer his hand.

The rancher's face paled under its tan, and his rage at this unexpected development nearly stifled him. But he had to control it; all hope of imposing his will by force had now gone, for hard and reckless as his outfit was, the men would not risk outlawry. The tide had turned against him, and it would need all his effrontery to save himself. He listened contemptuously while Lufton, concerned now only with his own safety, told the story of the trial. When he had finished, the Governor nodded comprehendingly.

"I can review the case, take any fresh evidence you may have, Embley, and order a new hearing if I deem it necessary," he decided. "I will do that now. It is not often one is able to administer the law in such charming surroundings." He walked over to a fallen tree-trunk and

sat down. "This will serve for the judicial bench, and the lady shall share it," he smiled. "I am afraid the rest of you will have to stand."

Wondering and wholly impressed by this quiet little man with the shrewd, dominating grey eyes, the citizens crowded round. There were scowling, sulky faces among them, but no one ventured a protest. The nearest approach to it came from Bart.

"Keep an eye on the prisoner—he ain't cleared yet," he audibly told his followers.

"As he returned to gaol voluntarily, I doubt if he will run away, Mr. Bartholomew," the Governor commented. "But he shall stand inside the ring on my left, and if you will take the opposite position, you will be able to watch him yourself."

The rancher scowled but complied. Severn noticed that Snap had contrived to secure a place just behind where he himself was standing.

The Governor turned to Lufton. "I should like to see the evidence the prisoner produced," he began.

He compared the writing in the account-book carefully with the two slips and then looked at Bartholomew.

"You think these are forgeries?"

"Don't think a-tall—I know they are," retorted the rancher.

"Very clever ones," Bleke said dryly, and Lufton squirmed uncomfortably. "Let us have your story, Embley."

The Judge gave a brief but complete account of his abduction and subsequent interview with the owner of the Bar B, and then, at the request of the Governor, Phil told her experience. When she had ended, Bleke turned to Bartholomew.

"Well, what have you to say, sir?" he asked.

"I ain't denyin' it," the rancher returned hardily. "It was the on'y way I could get 'em clear, an' the girl was promised to me a ready."

"That's not true, I had refused you," Phil interposed hotly. The cattleman lifted his shoulders. "Bah! A woman's whim," he replied.

"What influence had you over these outlaws?"

"The chief of 'em owed his life to me."

"And when you failed and returned to Hope, why didn't you organise a rescue?" asked the Governor.

"I gave a promise—that was the condition—an' I keep my word, even to such as them," Bart retorted.

"How did you get these bills?" was the next question.

"Never had 'em. Severn lied when he said he found 'em in my desk," the big man replied.

He was recovering his assurance, and his lips curled contemptuously as he looked down at the quiet little questioner he could have crushed with one hand, but who had the power, in certain circumstances, to blot him out of existence. He had heard of Governor Bleke, and knew that he had the reputation of being to evil-doers all that his name implied. At a gesture from Embley, the man Patch stepped forward, and the lawyer said sharply

"This is the Governor of the Territory. Take your hat off, fellow."

The witness shuffled his feet and looked embarrassed. "If His Excellency don't mind, I'd ruther not for a while," he replied huskily.

Bleke waved a hand impatiently. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Tell your tale and see that it's the truth, or I shall know how to deal with you."

Standing there, his hat slouched over his face and his thumbs hooked in his belt, the bandit shot a covert glance at Bartholomew, who was watching him uneasily. The rancher was feeling uncomfortable; he had taken little notice of the fellow when he had ridden in, but he now knew him for one of the White Masks. With a disdainful lift of the head he dismissed his misgivings—the word of an outlaw could not count for much, and he probably knew but little.

"I'll start with the bank robbery, though that ain't the beginning," the witness said, his voice low, hoarse, but pitched so that all could hear. "I was one o' the two who went in; the man who held the hosses is—dead." A spasm of satisfaction flitted across Bart's face at the news. "I didn't fire the shot that downed Rapson."

"Who did?" Bleke asked.

The witness pointed. "Bartholomew," he answered.

Gasps of amazement, mingled with bursts of derisive laughter, those of the accused being the loudest, followed the statement.

"Why, yu damn fool, less'n half an hour after the robbery I was in town organizin' a posse to search out the thieves," the Bar B man sneered.

"Yeah, a mile outa town yu left us, changed yore clothes an' hoss for others yu had cached, rode around through the brush an' come into Hope from the other side," Patch said, adding quietly, "I follered yu."

"It's a cursed lie, an' I'll twist yore——"

"Let the man tell his story; I'll listen to you afterwards, Bartholomew," the Governor intervened. He handed the alleged forgeries to Patch, and asked, "What do you know of those?"

"Bartholomew wrote 'em," was the unhesitating reply.

"Ignacio had orders to wipe Severn out, an' got wiped out hisself."

"Ignacio's alive now," the Bar B man protested.

"I saw him shot," the witness went on stolidly. "He ambushed Severn an' got what he deserved. The abduction o' Miss Masters an' the plantin' o' the stolen bills at the Lazy M were done by Bartholomew's orders, an' Severn's money was taken to him. Bartholomew was The Mask."

The rancher laughed scornfully.

"Yu've taught this skunk—a confessed outlaw and thief—a pretty tale to save yore friend's hide, ain't yu, Embley?" he jeered.

The lawyer directed his answer to the Governor. "I

did not know what this man was going to say," he explained. "He enabled us to escape, and insisted upon accompanying us, giving no reason."

Bleke nodded, his grey eyes cold and his features expressionless. For the time he was a judge, without friends or foes, there to weigh impartially the evidence put before him.

"What do you know about Masters?" he asked.

"A goodish bit," Patch replied. "I know that when he lost his wife it broke him up; he let go all holts an' went on the batter, drinkin' an' gamblin' with a mighty hard crowd. There come a day when the Desert Edge stage is held up an' the driver killed. Some here'll remember it."

A chorus of confirmatory nods, grunts and "Yu betchas" greeted the statement. One citizen had actually been a passenger in the despoiled vehicle, and the town had therefore never been allowed to forget the occurrence.

"Well, that job was pulled off by the gang Masters was hellin' around with," Patch continued. "He come out of a drunken daze the mornin' after it happened, an' was told that he'd not on'y took part in the robbery, but done the shootin', an' he was shown a paper to that effect, signed by one o' the others. Not bein' able to recollect where he was the day before, he believed it. The fella that had the paper promised it'd never be used—said he got it as a protection for the rest. As yu know, the road-agents never were traced.

"The shock of it jolted Masters straight agin. He gave up racketin' about an' went back to his ranch, but he wasn't the same man; the memory o' that mad crime—for he didn't doubt he'd done it—preyed on his mind, an' then the devil that held that damnin' evidence began to prey on him, too."

He paused a moment. The silence was broken only by the birds and the stamping hoofs of restless horses. The Bar B owner had lost his look of scornful unbelief, and there was fear in his eyes. He glanced furtively round, but he

was hemmed in; there was nothing for it but to brazen things out. After all, they could have no proof; Masters was dead, and so were the others.

"At first it was only small sums of money," the witness went on, "but they grew in size until at last Masters could raise no more. Then he had to give cattle, an' he began to see that nothin' less than his ranch an' his daughter would satisfy this human leech who, in the guise of a friend, was suckin' him dry. He looked round for some way o' savin' what was left o' his property, an' the idea came to him that if he warn't there, the power o' the blackmailer would be gone. So he put a trustworthy man in charge o' the Lazy M, an' then—faded."

"And the name of this—blackmailer?" the Governor asked.

Patch pointed again. "Bartholomew," he said quietly.

The rancher had known what was coming and was ready. He swept off his hat and bowed ironically to the Desert Edge lawyer.

"Embley, I gotta hand it yu, yo're a good romancer, an' yore pupil done it damn well," he said. "But talk is easy an' don't prove nothin'." He turned to the man who had so boldly accused him. "How comes it yu know such a helluva lot about Masters? Mebbe yu killed him yoreself."

The outlaw considered the matter for a moment and then said deliberately, "I s'pose I did, in a manner o' speakin'." A threatening murmur came from where the Lazy M outfit stood, and hearing it he flung up his head and laughed. "Aw right, boys," he cried, and the huskiness had gone from his voice, "don't get het up; I'm goin' to bring yore boss to life agin." With a quick gesture he whipped off his hat, took the patch from his eye, and said, "Phil."

The girl had been staring at him, unable to recognise the father she had given up hope of seeing again in the bearded man before her, but at the sound of her name spoken in the familiar voice, doubt could no longer exist, and with a cry of "Daddy," she ran to his arms.

For a few moments the cheering mob forgot everything save that the missing man, for whose murder another had been nearly done to death, had reappeared so dramatically. Severn, too, came in for part of the congratulations, men fighting to pat his back or shake him by the hand. The cow-puncher endured their enthusiasm with a saturnine smile; he knew that many of them would have hanged him with the utmost cheerfulness a short half hour earlier, had the cards fallen differently.

CHAPTER XXIV

To Black Bart, the reappearance of the missing rancher had been a well-nigh crushing blow, and for a moment flight seemed to be his only hope of escaping, at the best, a long term of imprisonment. One swift glance told him that in the excitement he was being neglected, and he began to slowly edge his way out of the crowd. But there was one other who, little interested in Masters, was greatly so in Bartholomew. The latter had only progressed a few yards when :

"Oh, don't," came a satirical warning whisper.

The Bar B man turned and saw that the speaker was Snap. The gunman's hands hung loosely over the butts of his forty-fives, and the slitted eyes and corded jaw-muscles conveyed the threat that was not in the words. The cattleman stiffened and stood still. Then he squared his shoulders, and his lips pursed in an ugly pout as a new thought came to him ; Masters alive might still be used.

The Governor's voice was heard, calling for order. The milling mob fell back, all eyes on the little man who, dropping as it were from the sky, dominated them by the sheer power of his personality.

"I think, gentlemen, that Mr. Masters has more to tell us," Bleke said.

With one arm round his daughter, the man who had been missing so long resumed his story. "There ain't much more, but what there is means a lot—to me," he began. "When I left the Lazy M, I went to The Sink, where I had another hoss, clothes an' grub cached ready. I changed, shoved my old duds into a cleft in the rocks——"

"An' a rifle," Severn commented, with a grin at the sheriff, who was looking very unhappy.

"Why, no," Masters said in surprise. "I left the gun on the hoss when I turned him loose, after shootin' a jack-rabbit an' bloodying the saddle; yu see, I wanted to be reckoned dead. Then I drifted into the Pinnacles country an' lay doggo. Soon as I got a fair crop o' whiskers, I joined the White Masks, tellin' 'em I'd lit outa Texas 'bout ten clear jumps ahead of a sheriff's posse; they fell for it." He looked at Severn. "Yu got my warnin's?"

"Yeah, an' I'm thankin' yu," the foreman replied. "I couldn't figure who sent 'em, but they was shore useful."

"A fella has a right to protect his own property, I reckon," Masters grinned. "I soon found out that while Shadwell was the nominal chief o' the bandits, the real head was Bartholomew."

The Bar B owner shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "An' I took a posse to hunt down my own men, huh?" he gibed.

"An' failed to find 'em," Bent cut in caustically. "I was one o' the fools that follered yu that day."

Like a trapped beast, the discredited ruler of Hope glared round and realised that his day was done. Some of the faces were plainly exultant, others disgusted, none were friendly; even his own men now evaded his glance. With a shake like that of a dog, he turned savagely to the Governor.

"A tangle o' lies, framed up by that fella Severn an' that damned lawyer who was helpin' him glom on to the Lazy M," he shouted.

Philip Masters laughed loudly. "Severn steal the Lazy M?" he cried. "Why, yu bonehead, he as good as owns it a'ready—got a mortgage on every foot o' the land. It was him lent the money I paid to keep yore lyin' mouth shut, though I didn't know it when he come as foreman."

"Oh!"

The exclamation came from Phil, and Severn studiously avoided looking in her direction. He knew from the tone

that her eyes were full of shame and contrition, and he did not want to meet them just then. Her father noticed that she was trembling, and asked what was the matter.

"Dad, and I treated him so mean," she whispered.

"Shucks ! honey, Severn ain't the man to hold it against yu," he comforted. "He's married, an' knows how it is with women."

She shook her head, tried again to catch the foreman's eye and failed, but she had more success with Larry, and what she saw appeared to be satisfactory, for it brought a tremulous smile to her lips again.

Bartholomew was not yet beaten ; he still had a card to play. He turned on Masters.

"Think yu've been damn clever, don't yu ?" he sneered. "Mebbe yo're forgettin' I've still got evidence to hang yu."

"Which evidence is a wicked lie, as Embley can prove," the other said fiercely.

The Governor took the paper the lawyer handed to him, read it, and looked gravely at Bartholomew.

"This is the signed and witnessed death-bed statement of a man named Mobey," he said. "In it he confesses that he shot the Desert Edge stage-driver, and that he wrote a document fastening the crime on Masters at your instigation."

Bartholomew tried a laugh of incredulity, but before the stern, accusing eyes of the Governor, the sound died in his throat. Look where he might, he now saw none but threatening faces, and fear with clammy fingers clutched at his heart. Over the spot where he stood, the tree which had borne so many tragic burdens cast an ominous shadow, and he could not keep his gaze from the big branch. His mind dropped into the past. How long ago was it ? Severn, who had seen and read the look, answered him.

"Ten years back, Bartholomew," he was saying, and his voice was ice-cold, "yu an' some o' yore outfit hanged an old man to that tree on a charge o' stealin' cattle. He was innocent—yu had altered the brands yorself an' put the beasts in his pasture, his on'y crime was being a 'nester.'"

The rancher moistened his dry lips. "Yu say so," he snarled. "Prove it."

Severn pointed to Darby. "That man was ridin' for yu at the time," he said. "He was of the party. Because he protested, he's been spared; the others, well, yu know what's happened to them, Bartholomew."

Despite himself, the big man shivered. "I fired that fella—he'd say anythin'," he defended. "Anyways, it's his word against mine."

"No, there is another eye-witness here," the foreman said.

Bartholomew's eyes widened as, obeying Severn's gesture, Larry stepped forward. "Him?" he cried in derision. "Why, he musta been on'y a kid."

"Yu said it," Severn told him sternly. "The kid whose father yu hanged before his eyes, whose home yu burned, an' whom yu drove penniless into the wilderness, Laurence Forby."

The revelation struck Bartholomew dumb; he did not doubt the truth of it. He could only glare at this "pup"—as he was wont to contemptuously call him—who had emerged from the obscurity of the past to put the finishing touch to his downfall. This boy, with the tense, granite face and vengeful gaze, would get all that he, Bartholomew, had schemed for—the ranch, the girl. . . . At the thought a gust of red rage swept through him, the rage of a cornered brute, desiring only to strike before it dies. Madness, the madness of bitter hate, possessed him.

"I oughta wiped yu out then, yu whelp," he muttered thickly, unaware that he was thinking aloud. Then with a savage oath, he bent forward as though about to spring. "I lose, but yu don't win," he hissed, and snatching out his gun, levelled it full at Larry's breast.

Swift as he was, another was swifter. Before the murderous finger could squeeze the trigger, a lance of flame came from Severn's side, the crash of the shot drowning Phil's cry, and Bartholomew, flinging his hands high,

staggered, sagged at the knees and dropped in the dust, his gun exploding harmlessly.

Severn, leaning forward, the acrid smoke swirling about his middle, looked at his fallen foe for a moment, handed Snap back his gun, and turned away. Amid an awestruck silence, one of the Bar B outfit stooped and examined the body.

"Plumb atween the eyes, with a strange gun snaked from 'nother fella's belt," he announced wonderingly. "Sudden? Well, I should smile. I reckon the boss just invited hisself to his own funeral."

And that was Bartholomew's epitaph.

* * * * *

That same evening, as Severn was busy straightening up his shack at the Lazy M, a saucy, smiling face peeped through the open door.

"Dad says, will you take supper with us?" its owner said.

The foreman looked up, his face grave but his eyes crinkling with amusement.

"I'm obliged, but I'll eat with the outfit," he replied.

The girl laughed merrily. "I've won," she cried to someone outside, and then to Severn, "I bet Larry ten—I bet Larry you would say just that."

Severn grinned at the slip she nearly made. Stepping to the door, he regarded his friend critically.

"Larry looks just as pleased he lost," was his comment. "O' course, if he's honin' to pay that debt, why, I ain't noticin'."

Phil's face grew rosy. "There are times when I don't like you a bit," she pouted, but her look contradicted the words.

"An' me havin' just won a bet for yu," the foreman reproved.

"Oh, you're impossible," she cried, "Bring him along, Larry. Supper is ready, and Dinah will be heartbroken if

we're late. She's never had a real live Governor to feed before."

She danced on ahead, and the two men followed more soberly. The eyes of the younger were full of adoration.

"Don," he said, and there was a tremor in his voice, "I ain't worthy of her."

Severn grinned at him. "Yu don't reckon yo're tellin' me news, do yu?" he asked quizzically.

The meal was the merriest the Lazy M had ever seen. In the course of it, Embley, with a knowing look, asked a question.

"Was it entirely accident, Governor, that brought you to Hope Again to-day?"

The great little man's eyes twinkled, and he shook his head at the lawyer.

"Playing the brand of poker you do, Judge, your faith in the element of chance should be stronger," he replied, and then, "Well, maybe I did hear that a certain desperate young outlaw"—he smiled at Sudden—"had come to life again, and perhaps Bartholomew's activities were more widely known than he wished."

And that was all he would say on the subject.

Later on, from a secluded corner to which they had retired, as they fondly hoped, unobserved, Larry and Phil saw Severn come out of the lighted room, cross the verandah and lean against the rail. A lithe grey form padded noiselessly after him and squatted on its haunches at his side.

There was no moon yet, but the great vault of the heavens was punctured by a myriad pin-pricks of light. From the bunk-house came the metallic tinkle of a banjo and the vociferously-shouted chorus of a song. Through the curtain of the night the ground, sloping down from the ranch-house, seemed to sink into a vast, motionless sea of grey shadow, interspersed with darker patches like islands where woods and smaller hills and vales broke the surface-level. In the far distance the Mesa Mountains showed black against the deep blue of the sky.

But the Lazy M foreman saw none of this. His vision was of another ranch-house away beyond the mountains, on the veranda of which sat a golden-haired woman—his woman—with a chubby, kicking man-child on her knee. He could see the smile in her eyes, and hear the low, chiding tones :

“Be good now, you little—outlaw.”

He flung away his cigarette, stooped to caress the rough head leaning against his thigh, and the watching couple caught the muttered words :

“To-morrow, old fella, we’re goin’—home.”

THE END